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Antecedents and consequences of employee based brand equity

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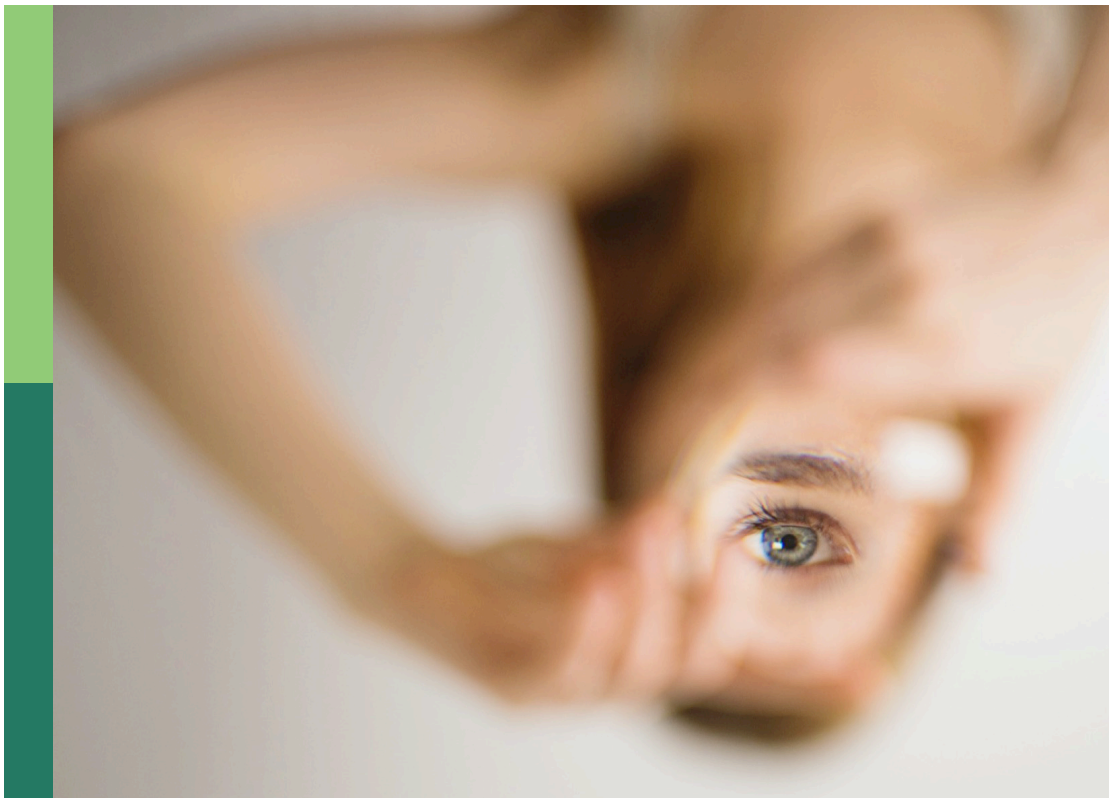

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Antecedents and consequences of employee based brand equity

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Perception of Justice and Employees' Brand-Based Equity in the Service Sector: Evidence From Education Industry

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This study aims to investigate the impact of justice perception of the employees on three dimensions of employee-based brand equity (EBBE) under the mediating role of psychological contract fulfillment. For this purpose, data have been collected from the employees of the education industry under the convenience sampling technique. In this regard, a survey method was used, and questionnaires were distributed among 420 respondents, out of which 310 questionnaires were received back, and after discarding 32 partially filled questionnaires, useable responses were left (279 observations). Data have been analyzed through structural equation modeling, and the partial least square (PLS)-SEM approach has been used in this regard through the Smart PLS software. Measurement and structural models were assessed, and all the indicators of reliability and validity have been found to be fit. Path estimation indicates that perception of justice promotes brand endorsement and brand allegiance, while the relationship of perception of justice and brand-consistent behavior has not been found statistically significant. Moreover, it has also been found that perception of justice ensures employees that their psychological contract has been met. In addition, psychological contract fulfillment has found a mediating mechanism between the perception of justice and the three dimensions of EBBE.

Keywords: employee brand-based quality, perception of justice, brand endorsement, brand allegiance, brand consistent behavior, psychological contract fulfillment

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INTRODUCTION

Brand equity, or perhaps the value given to a product by the brand, is a major indicator of brand and commercial success and, therefore, is frequently a company's most valuable asset (Ambler, 2000; Myers, 2003). In contrast, the research acknowledges that this value may be received by a variety of stakeholder groups, the most published scientific studies, and brand equity from customer's or firm's perspective (Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2010; Veloutsou and Guzman, 2017). Employees' importance in fulfilling any brand promise to various parties (e.g., consumers) is extensively established, especially in the context of services. Employee knowledge and talents, for instance, play a crucial role in the consumers' brand experience and, as a result, their brand conceptions (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2006). Limited research has been done on how to

improve employee-based brand equity (EBBE), such that stakeholders may better execute their responsibilities as endorsers (Helm, 2011; Sirianni et al., 2013; Morokane et al., 2016).

Employees' perceived added value because of employee-based brand development activities is captured by EBBE (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). Employees' internalization of the company's values is a crucial element in internal branding, as continuous execution of the brand promise to consumers is improbable without it (Helm et al., 2016). The success of organizational development depends on internal stakeholders' synchronization with the company's values and how this perception equates to brand and/or consumer behaviors (Anbarasan and Sushil, 2018). Customers' experiences with the brand promise would then remain ineffective without employees' synchronization with the company's core values (Helm et al., 2016; Du Preez et al., 2017). Employees' self-esteem and organizational affiliation are boosted by working for an organization with a good employer brand (Lievens et al., 2007).

By increasing the organization's trust with workers, consistent implementation of the brand promise sustains strong commitment and high performance among employees and, ultimately, organizational effectiveness (Kashive and Khanna, 2017). Various dimensions of EBBE have been explored in the past but very less attention has been given to the three-dimensional benefits of EBBE, including brand endorsement, brand allegiance, and brand-consistent behavior of employees (Kashive and Khanna, 2017). These dimensions provide core values to branding concepts and should be evaluated for developing brand equity among employees. This is based on external employee marketing/conveyance of the brand to everyone else, or referral, which is seen as a significant part of brand promoting conducts (Shinnar et al., 2004). The willingness of an employee to speak positively about the company (brand) as well as to quickly suggest the company (brand) to anyone is referred to as brand endorsement (Piehler, 2018).

Few studies have supported the notion that workers who seem to have a favorable attitude about their employers are organically driven to engage in meaningful information exchange. Employee involvement has several advantages. Interpersonal advocacy by employees sometimes leads to beneficial organizational productivity, such as reduced recruiting costs, improved job performance, and enhanced pre-employment awareness, all of which influence organizational integration. Employee brand allegiance is related to employees' future desire to stay with the company (brand). Despite the substantial economic impact of losing competent individuals, this desire is seen as a big choice (Ramlall, 2004). This also aids in the development of important human capital, wherein people are deemed to have skills, expertise, and understanding, which provides economic value for businesses through higher efficiency (Snell and Dean, 1992).

The success of a service brand is exacerbated by the recruitment of efficient personnel who regularly display brand-related activities. This happens because the brand equity claim is continuously executed in an expense-efficient manner. According to studies, an employee's declaration of the desire to remain employed reflects their understanding of the importance of upholding the brand's values (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). This idea of planned behavior, which claims that the strongest indicator of future actions is the desire to act, exemplifies this future-oriented thinking (Schiffman and Tuncay, 2001). Workers who are comfortable with the workplace environment are more likely to engage in behaviors that go beyond the job's technically defined standards (Beckett-Camarata, 2003). Brand-consistent behavior, e.g., might be described as an employee's non-prescribed behavior that is consistent with the organization's brand values (Burmann et al., 2009).

Another important aspect of product behavior is its voluntary nature, but it is critical for organizational efficiency (Martín-de Castro et al., 2011). This evolves because service organizations are unable to foresee all of the right employee behaviors needed for organizational performance (Deluga, 1994). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) defined brand-consistent behavior, or brand citizenship behavior, as "the crucial (behavioral) ingredient for effective internal brand management." There are minor variations between brand-related behavior and organizational-related behavior. Equality and fairness in the distribution of appropriate resources, as well as equal and respectful behavior, are social necessities for persons in every circle of acquaintances (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). A professional social circle is formed by the working environment. Organizational justice has been declared to be one of the most important aspects of organizational practices.

The concept of justice may be defined as people's and worker' perceptions of fair and equal treatment. Distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice are the three forms of organizational justice that have been examined (De Cremer, 2005; Chandio et al., 2020). When it comes to resource allocation and distribution justice, an individual is accustomed to compare his or her rewards with those of his or her counterparts and those of people in comparable positions in other organizations; at the very least, he or she wants to be in balance (Greenberg, 1987). Whereas favorable responses to inquiries on the application of processes on him/her and his/her peers are viewed as fairness in procedure execution, negative responses are perceived as partiality. Employees, as members of the professional community, have a right to expect fairness in allocation and processes, as well as to be treated with dignity.

People in the workplace have been shown to compromise on resource distribution and processes but not on interactional justice (Chandio et al., 2020). Interactional justice is a branch of procedural justice that deals with the human aspect of organizational activities, i.e., how management (or those in charge of rewards and resources) treats the victim of injustice (Ahmad, 2018). In recent times, the importance of how a firm treats its employees has experienced an influx of academics. For example, Patterson suggested that businesses be forced to offer a level playing field for all of their employees (Patterson, 2010). Therefore, based on the gap in evaluation of justice perception on EBBE, this framework of research was designed in which justice perception was taken as an independent variable influencing the EBBE.

The psychological contract as a good idea for describing the existing job interactions has a vast literature (Guest, 2004). A psychological contract is described as "individual

views about the parameters of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization, created by the organization." In a customized labor market where workers tend to have more tailored relationships with their employers, studying the employment relationship *via* the perspective of the psychological contract is probably well suited. Nevertheless, almost as much as the contents of the agreement are signed directly, the capacity to execute on what has been promised is a critical factor in understanding individual workplace reactions. Organizational culture, organizational citizenship, and turnover intentions are all traditional outcomes connected to psychological contract fulfillment (or lack thereof) (Turnley et al., 2003; Griffin and Sutton, 2004; Sturges et al., 2005).

A few researchers have already explored the mediating impact of psychological contract fulfillment between some factors affecting EBBE (e.g., Deepa and Baral, 2021) but did not evaluate the impact of justice perception on EBBE with psychological contract fulfillment as a helping tool leaving a gap for us to evaluate its mediating link between both. Connecting the ties between perceptions of justice with EBBE, this study focused on evaluating the relationship between justice perception and brand endorsement, brand allegiance, and brand-consistent behaviors. This study also provided information about a mediating role of psychological contract fulfillment between justice perception and EBBE beneficial dimensions, i.e., brand endorsement, brand allegiance, and brand-consistent behaviors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

This research is focused on assessing the impact of justice perception on EBBE benefits, such as brand endorsement, brand allegiance, and brand-consistent behaviors, with the mediation aid of psychological contract fulfillment. Most of the research in the past has shown that these attributes are controlled and paved through different theories, such as social exchange theory (SET), social comparison theory, equity theory, psychological contract theory, signaling theory, and affective events theory (Guerrero and Herrbach, 2008; Badawy and El-Fekey, 2017; Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021).

In management studies, the signaling theory may make you realize how companies attempt to sway the attitude of their employees. Employees are expected to behave positively by their employers, and their signals serve to elicit this behavior. As a result, signaling theory emphasizes the deliberate delivery of positive words to diverse workers regarding desired organizational characteristics (Connelly et al., 2010). Therefore, the theory could have an impact on the psychological contract fulfillment of the employees.

Perception of justice and fairness have largely been researched in connection with productivity using SET, which looks at different types of human transactions. According to theory, any human interaction is founded on subjective cost–benefit analysis (Aryee et al., 2002). According to the equity theory, employees' perceptions of unjust labor reward distribution cause stress, which they endeavor to rectify.

In contrast, workers want to limit their losses, thus, they don't want to lower their in-role productivity because it is directly related to their incentives, and therefore, they tend to employ contextual performance as a reaction to fair/unfair reward distribution (Saleem and Gopinath, 2015). The notion of social comparisons was used to provide a new method. Several essential aspects of the organizational setting, such as organizational justice, performance evaluation, and emotional behavior in the workplace, have been explained using social comparison processes by a few scholars (Spence et al., 2011; Saleem and Gopinath, 2015).

Researchers contend that the SET influenced most of the models used to describe organizational justice and employee behavior. While this theory brought a lot to our comprehension, it still does not describe why workers participate in such behaviors (Goodman and Haisley, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2007; Spence et al., 2011). Festinger established the principle of social comparison as a source of knowledge for self-evaluation in 1954. According to the study by Festinger, the social comparison would be a normal and fundamental human need in which individuals compare their thoughts and talents with those of others, particularly when objective physical criteria are lacking. A practice of pondering about facts around one or more individuals' tendencies and opinions in connection to one's ability and opinion is referred to as social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Goodman and Haisley, 2007). The roots of organizational justice and social comparison are evident since justice theory is originally based on the Adams' equity theory (Adams, 1965), which was inspired by the social comparisons theory (Festinger, 1954).

These views are based on the same hypothesis, which is that people compare things. People compare their inputs and outputs with some referent others who are primarily at the same level to assess the fairness of their outcomes in equity theory, whereas in the social comparisons theory, individuals compare their ability and opinions with others after rating them in different levels (above or below) for self-evaluation, consciousness, and identity (Kim et al., 2015). Social similarities exist in two different directions, namely, upwardly with reference groups who are rated higher than the assessor level, and downwardly with reference groups who are rated lower than the evaluator level (Van Yperen et al., 2006). Individuals' perceptions of their talents and attitudes are formed as a result of this comparison (Moon et al., 2016). This impression can be either favorable or negative, resulting in a positive or negative emotional state. Individuals' responses toward perceived justice are influenced by their emotional state (Collie et al., 2002). These theories provided a basis for assessing the relationships of this study.

Association of Perception of Justice With Employee-Based Brand Equity

Justice is a basic principle in businesses, and whether there's a promotion determination, work assignment, incentive distribution, or another sort of social transaction, issues of fairness will always emerge (Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991). In the literature, the concepts "justice," "fairness," and "equity" have all been used interchangeably. Any event, activity, or

decision is assessed as fair or unfair depending on the individual's views about the choice and his or her value or normative system in relation to all those beliefs. Humans are social beings, and businesses must develop environments that allow people to connect socially (Moorman, 1991; Bies, 2005; Coetzee, 2006; Suliman and Al Kathairi, 2013). Therefore, many types of activities that happen between employees at work have been investigated in the literature. In complaint and service recovery situations, justice theory gives a platform for understanding contentment (Allen et al., 2014).

Distributive, procedural, and interactional justice are the three dimensions of justice. A distributive element is concerned with the perceived justice of results, whereas the procedural element is concerned with the justice of the rules and methods used to generate the consequence. The interpersonal care individuals receive during the dispute resolution mechanism that is the emphasis of the interactional element. Many facets of a service provider's operations are likely to have an impact on people's perceptions of interactional fairness (Hazée et al., 2017). Because judgments of the outcome's justice are more heavily influenced by human emotions, procedural justice is less visible (Zhao et al., 2012). Customers may find it difficult to discern between procedural and interactional justice because many features of both are linked. As a result, for service firms, interactional fairness tends to play a larger role in determining happiness. For instance, whether or not such a store allows an unhappy consumer to describe the situation whether or not the merchant considers that knowledge is both critical components of grievance interaction (Lee et al., 2017).

Customers are less worried about procedural fairness when they have more clear and explicit information about the service provider's reliability, according to a few studies. Whenever customers believe the supplier can be entrusted to follow fair procedures, they are more sensitive to the fairness of the conclusion. All interactional and distributive fairness have a considerable influence on perceived satisfaction, while procedural justice does not (Akram et al., 2017). Few studies support the notion that workers who seem to have a favorable attitude about their employers are organically driven to engage in meaningful information exchange. Employee involvement has several advantages. Interpersonal advocacy by employees sometimes leads to beneficial organizational productivity, such as reduced recruiting costs, improved job performance, and enhanced pre-employment awareness, all of which influence organizational integration.

Employee brand allegiance is related to employees' future desire to stay with the company (brand). Despite the substantial economic impact of losing competent individuals, this desire is seen as a big choice (Ramlall, 2004). This also aids in the development of important human capital, wherein people are deemed to have skills, expertise, and understanding, which provides economic value for businesses through higher efficiency (Snell and Dean, 1992). Workers who are comfortable with the workplace environment are more likely to engage in behaviors that go beyond the job's technically defined standards (Beckett-Camarata, 2003).

For example, brand-consistent behavior might be described as an employee's non-prescribed behavior that is consistent with the organization's brand values (Burmann et al., 2009). Burmann et al. (2009) defined the brand-consistent behavior, or brand citizenship behavior, as "the crucial (behavioral) ingredient for effective internal brand management". There are minor variations between brand-related behavior and organizational-related behavior (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). It is assumed like this because brands are developed through organizations, and the behaviors of employees toward their organizations lead them to develop the same behaviors for the brand (Brethower et al., 2021).

A lot of consideration in the past has been given to different aspects of customer-based brand equity but very less attention has been given to EBBE so far. The major exploration of perceived organizational justice remained unanswered in the past toward creating EBBE. Therefore, we designed this research, and, in this regard, we proposed the following hypotheses to evaluate the impact of the perception of justice of employees toward creating EBBE (see **Figure 1** for conceptual framework).

H1. Perception of justice is associated with brand endorsement.

H2. Perception of justice is associated with brand allegiance.

H3. Perception of justice is associated with brand-consistent behavior.

Mediating Role of Psychological Contract Fulfillment

Levinson was the first to discuss the psychological contract in full in Levinson et al. (1962). Mutual duties exist between the employer and the employee, some of which are explicitly established in the job's terms and conditions and the employment contract. Expectations concerning job stability, work content, career growth, and less well-defined incentives and perks are also less formal. These expectations make up the psychological contract. Certain aspirations, including salary, vacation pay, and sick pay, are clearly stated and recognized, while others, such as job stability and promotion chances, are simply hinted at.

The psychological contract is founded on reciprocity (it binds both parties) and proportionality (it entails an equal interchange among both stakeholders), as well as the idea of organizational justice. If the company refuses and is unable to fulfill the contract, it may have negative effects on both the individual and the company. As the psychological contract is not well defined or officially recognized, the employer and employee may have quite different ideas about what constitutes a violation (Nimmo, 2018). Both mutual trust and reciprocity are linked to increased performance and progress in the workplace. They are also linked to self-reported indicators of met expectations and intend to work for the same company in the future.

Mutual adherence to the psychological contract does have a favorable impact on the workplace. A variety of harmful behaviors are linked to a violation of the psychological contract. Psychological contract violation was found to lower organizational trust, have fewer collaborative workplace

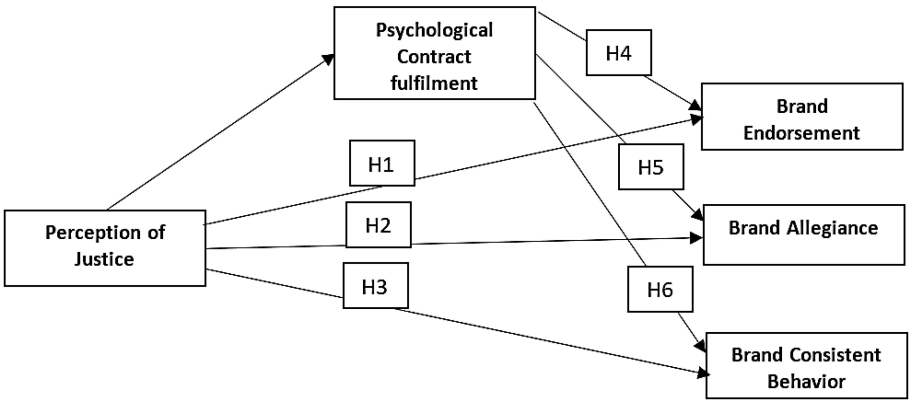

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

conditions, and have increased absenteeism in a sample of customer service personnel. Employees may regard inconsistencies between an organization's declared behavioral norms and its actual behavior as a contract breach (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004; Deery et al., 2006).

Several researchers in the past have looked into the relationship of perceived justice and psychological contract fulfillment in which scientists explored the impact of psychological contract fulfillment on organizational justice (Estreder et al., 2019). Psychological contracts are characterized by mutual interaction of perceived commitments and responsibilities that describe the criteria of the workforce relationship between the employer (i.e., inducements, namely, participation in decision-making, working conditions, and employment security) and the employee (i.e., contributions, namely, protecting the company's image, accepting an internal transfer if necessary, and working overtime or extra hours when required).

The degree to which employees perform psychological contract fulfillment or violation is an important factor to consider when assessing their job relationship. Failing to maintain the commitments made in the psychological contract results in negative work outcomes, such as lower job satisfaction, organizational commitment, in-role competence, and organizational citizenship behaviors, as well as greater desire to quit or attrition (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004; Guest, 2004). Psychological contract fulfillment has given some promising and significant results in some past studies as a mediator (Ashfaq et al., 2018; Saeed, 2020; Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021; Gulzar et al., 2021). Therefore, we hypothesized that psychological contract fulfillment could also mediate between justice perception and benefits of EBBE, such as brand endorsement, brand allegiance, and brand-consistent behaviors of employees (see **Figure 1** for conceptual framework). The hypotheses are as follows.

H4. Psychological contract fulfillment mediates the relationship between perception of justice and brand endorsement.

H5. Psychological contract fulfillment mediates the relationship between perception of justice and brand allegiance.

H6. Psychological contract fulfillment mediates the relationship between perception of justice and brand-consistent behavior.

METHODS

Participants and Procedure

Participants in this study were approached through a cross-sectional research design keeping in view the theoretical orientation of the study. A non-probability sampling technique was followed, and data were obtained through the convenience sampling method. This technique provides ease and access to approach respondents with low time and low-cost benefits. Moreover, this technique was most suitable, as the respondents were from the service sector (i.e., education sector) where the nature of jobs and activities performed by the employees remains almost symmetrical. For this purpose, a sample of 420 respondents was approached in this regard to meet a reasonable and suitable sample size. This sample size was representative of population based on several criteria; for instance, as a general rule of thumb, we need five to ten respondents against each study construct. In contrast, in this study, a total of five study constructs have been operationalized, so a sample of 50 respondents was justified.

Moreover, according to the criteria recommended by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), in a cross-sectional study design, a total of 384 is sufficient. In this regard, 310 questionnaires were received back, and after eliminating the missing and incomplete responses, the sample size left to 278 observations which have been used in the final data analysis. Thus, this study met the sample size requirement sufficiently. Before administrating the questionnaires on large scale, prior permission from the concerned institution head was obtained. Respondents were briefed about the study purpose, nature of the study constructs being investigated,

and their informed consent was obtained. Moreover, they were assured about the data anonymity and confidentiality issues. Thus, this technique has helped us to reduce the error in estimation as a result of common method biases (Ng and Feldman, 2013).

As noted in earlier studies that first-line employees are occupied extensively in their duties and it is a chance that they might face time difficulties in reporting the survey items, we used reverse coded items in the questionnaire to restrict the respondents from providing monotonic responses. This technique also helped us to minimize the common method biases (Malhotra et al., 2006). In addition to this, we placed the study constructs at different places in the questionnaire so that respondents could not generate a correlation. Demographic information of the respondents was also obtained. In this regard, male and female participants constitute almost equal parts of the sample, i.e., 56% of male respondents and 44% of female respondents. The majority of the respondents have an age of fewer than 40 years, while only 20% of respondents have an age more than 40 years. Similarly, most of the respondents were married, while a portion of the respondents living single and as a single parent was 30%.

Measures

The independent variable of this study (perception of justice) has been operationalized based on 10 items used by Ghosh et al. (2014). This construct was operationalized based on three dimensions, namely, procedural justice, distribute justice, and interactional justice. Sample items for this scale include, "Have you been able to express your views and feelings during those procedures?" and "Does your supervisor communicate details in a timely manner? The original version of this scale contains 20 items, while keeping in view the theoretical orientation of the study, we have used the most relevant items in this study. Similarly, mediating variable of this study, i.e., psychological contract fulfillment is operationalized based on 12 items scale, developed by Guerrero and Herrbach (2008). Four dimensions were covered by this scale, namely career perspective, job content, relationship with others, and compensation. Originally, this scale covers 15 items, whereas this study conceptualized 12 items and three items for each dimension have been used.

Similarly, the scale for EBBE has been used to measure the three dimensions, namely, brand endorsement, brand-consistent behavior, and brand allegiance. Sample items for these dimensions include, "I say positive things about the organization (brand) I work for, "I plan to be with the organization (brand) I work for, for a while," and "I demonstrate behaviors that are consistent with the brand promise of the organization I work for." This scale has previously been used in the literature (King and Grace, 2010; King et al., 2012). The reason to use shortened items/scales is based on the recommendation of Hagtvet and Sipos (2016) to reduce the burden on respondents to work through lengthy complete forms. Moreover, during recent years, the trend to create short forms for construct measures is also increasing.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This study followed a multivariate data analysis model keeping in view the complex nature of study constructs. For this purpose, a structural modeling approach based on partial least square (PLS)-SEM was used, as recommended by Sarstedt et al. (2014). In this scenario, this technique was most suited because theory related to EBBE is under development, and this study was aimed to explain variance in EBBE based on the perception of justice and fulfillment of the psychological contract (Hair et al., 2017).

As recommended by Hair et al. (2017), structural equation modeling should be assessed based on the measurement and structural model. In this regard, the first measurement model was assessed based on reliability and validity. Thus, the first portion of the analysis is related to the assessment of the measurement model which is related to reliability and validity. Initially, the outer loadings of the measurement model were assessed and items with poor outer loadings were dropped from the analysis. In this regard, two items from the construct perception of justice have been dropped due to poor outer loadings. In this regard, a benchmark of 0.708 value for outer loadings was set. Thus, two items from the perception of justice were with weak loadings, and they were dropped. These two items were PJ-7 and PJ-09. Similarly, two items from psychological contract fulfillment were dropped due to poor outer loadings, namely, PF-09 and PF-11.

No item from the construct EBBE was dropped (see **Table 1**). However, some items were observed with lower outer loadings values, but these were contributing significantly to the model average of variance extracted (AVE) (i.e., AVE was greater than 0.50, sharing more than 50% of the variance in the construct). From the perspective of reliability and validity (see **Table 2**), all the constructs indicated strong reliability, and it was observed that all constructs have reliability values greater than 0.60, in terms of alpha, composite reliability, and rho-A (see **Table 2**). Thus, all the indicators have been found statistically fit, indicating a satisfactory level (values larger than the threshold, i.e., >0.60) (Mela and Kopalle, 2002).

As recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity was assessed based on the square root of AVE concerning the correlations of the respective construct (Hair et al., 2017). Thus, based on the square root of the AVE of all study constructs, it was observed that the square root of the AVE of all constructs was greater than the correlation value in each row and column (see **Table 3**; Hair et al., 2011).

To assess discriminant validity, we have also employed the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation (HTMT) criteria (see **Table 4**); here, it has been observed that all the ratios among study constructs have been found less than 0.90. For HTMT, two criteria are followed: one is liberal and the other is conservative; for conservative criteria, the value of the HTMT ratio should be less than 0.85, while in the case of liberal criteria, the value of HTMT should be less than 0.90. This study met both of these threshold limits (see **Table 4**), namely, brand-consistent behavior and brand endorsement, respectively. Overall model fitness was assessed based on F2, and a satisfactory level of effect size has been observed (see **Tables 5**, **6**; Hair et al., 2017). In addition to this, we

TABLE 1 | Outer loadings.

Indicator	Brand Allegiance	Brand Consistent Behavior	Brand Endorsement	Perception of Justice	Psychological Contract Fulfillment
BA1	0.815				
BA2	0.613				
BA3	0.748				
BA4	0.720				
BCB1		0.889			
BCB2		0.941			
BCB3		0.894			
BE1			0.800		
BE2			0.834		
BE3			0.808		
BE4			0.811		
PF1					0.815
PF10					0.789
PF12					0.764
PF2					0.892
PF3					0.809
PF4					0.659
PF5					0.896
PF6					0.742
PF7					0.622
PF8					0.813
PJ1				0.646	
PJ10				0.757	
PJ2				0.770	
PJ3				0.734	
PJ4				0.871	
PJ5				0.678	
PJ6				0.823	
PJ8				0.696	

TABLE 2 | Reliability and validity.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Allegiance	0.739	0.823	0.817	0.530
Brand Consistent Behavior	0.893	0.894	0.934	0.825
Brand Endorsement	0.834	0.855	0.886	0.661
Perception of Justice	0.888	0.900	0.911	0.563
Psychological Contract Fulfillment	0.929	0.942	0.941	0.616

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larker criteria).

Construct	Brand Allegiance	Brand Consistent Behavior	Brand Endorsement	Perception of Justice	Psychological Contract Fulfillment
Brand Allegiance	***0.728***				
Brand Consistent Behavior	0.374	***0.908***			
Brand Endorsement	0.467	0.153	***0.813***		
Perception of Justice	0.511	0.239	0.424	***0.750***	
Psychological Contract Fulfillment	0.733	0.365	0.314	0.314	***0.785***

Square root of AVE of respective construct is reported in diagonal values.

have also tested predictive relevance that was assessed based on Q2 and was observed greater than zero (see **Figure 2**), indicating a good predictive relevance of the model (Geisser, 1975).

Hypothesis testing has been done based on t and p statistics (see **Figure 3** and **Table 7**), whereas, in this study, mediation was checked based on indirect path significance. The first hypothesis

TABLE 4 | Discriminant validity (HTM ratio).

Construct	Brand Allegiance	Brand Consistent Behavior	Brand Endorsement	Perception of Justice	Psychological Contract Fulfillment
Brand Allegiance	-				
Brand Consistent Behavior	**0.419**	-			
Brand Endorsement	**0.563**	**0.171**	-		
Perception of Justice	**0.622**	**0.257**	**0.474**	-	
Psychological Contract Fulfillment	**0.701**	**0.397**	**0.341**	**0.328**	-

TABLE 5 | R^2 and adjusted R^2.

Construct	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Brand Allegiance	0.625	0.622
Brand Consistent Behavior	0.150	0.144
Brand Endorsement	0.216	0.210
Psychological Contract Fulfillment	0.099	0.095

of this study was based on the relationship of perception of justice and brand endorsement. The values of t and p were within the acceptable range ($t = 7.295$ and $p < 0.05$) and indicate that this hypothesis is supported (see **Table 8**); thus, H1 is supported. Empirical findings of this study indicate that perception of justice promotes employees' sense, and employees perceive that their employer is sincere with them and thus positive feelings are generated among employees. These positive feelings drive employees to advocate positively regarding the employer and they tend to endorse their organization among others. Similarly, the second hypothesis of this study that is related to the perception of justice and brand allegiance was also found statistically significant ($t = 6.745$ and $p < 0.05$), and H2 was supported based on empirical evidence (see **Figure 4**).

In contrast, H3 of this study related to the relationship of perception of justice and brand-consistent behavior has not been found statistically significant, and H3 is not supported because the values of t and p were not within an acceptable range ($t = 1.951$ and $p > 0.05$). Moreover, in the case of mediation analysis, indirect paths for H4, H5, and H6 have been found statistically significant which indicates that psychological fulfillment partially mediates the relationship between perception of justice and three dimensions of EBBE. However, this study also employed variance account for (VAF) approach to confirm the nature of the mediation, i.e., either partial or full mediation. For this purpose, an indirect effect of each path was divided through the total effect. In this regard, VAF about the H4 was less than 20% (i.e., 15%) which indicates no mediation, while for the other two paths (i.e., H5 and H6), the value of VAF has been observed as 39% and 43%. Hence, H5 and H6 are supported through the results, while H4 was not found statistically significant.

These findings are supported by the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). These findings are in alignment with the previous findings that perception of justice has the potency to promote positive behaviors among employees (Sekiguchi, 2007; Bharadwaj, 2014; Erkmen, 2018). Moreover, these findings are in line with the recommendations of McLean Parks et al. (1998) that psychological contract fulfillment is "the idiosyncratic set of reciprocal expectations held by employees concerning their obligations (what they will do for the employer) and their entitlements (what they expect to receive in return)."

Thus, it can be argued that fulfillment of the psychological contract is rooted in the exchange of socioeconomic benefits (Blau, 1964) which comes under the premise of SET (Blau, 1964). In addition, it would be due to the fact that most of the individuals tend to pursue permanent employment as compared with temporary employment (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999), so it might be the reason that there were the employees as most permanent employees. Previous studies have indicated that psychological contract fulfillment results in positive outcomes, such as organizational commitment (Sturges et al., 2005), so findings of these studies are consistent with these studies as the fulfillment of psychological contract can result in EBBE (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Robinson and Morrison, 2000).

DISCUSSION

This research was based on identifying the impact or association of perception of justice among the employees of the service section with EBBE benefits, such as brand endorsement, brand allegiance, and brand-consistent behaviors of the employees. The topic of workplace justice has carved out a prominent position in the literature. According to several studies, a greater employee sense of justice has a favorable influence on several facets of EBBE (Ghosh et al., 2014). Justice is a basic principle in businesses, and when there is a promotion determination, work assignment, incentive distribution, or other sorts of social transaction, issues of fairness will always emerge (Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991). Humans are social beings, and businesses must develop environments that allow people to connect socially (Moorman, 1991; Bies, 2005; Coetzee, 2006; Suliman and Al Kathairi, 2013).

The results of this study produced some very promising insights about justice perception and indicated that a sense of justice among the employees of an organization could develop certain behaviors and attitudes which could lead to EBBE which is also an aim of the employer. They could perform better and develop the brand positively. For instance, the first hypothesis of the study indicated that if the perception of justice prevails between employer and employee, then it could lead to the development of the endorser aptitude in the employee. He could be a good endorser, which would certainly improve brand equity. Researchers in the past did not notice such relationships;

TABLE 6 | Effect size.

Construct	Brand Allegiance	Brand Consistent Behavior	Brand Endorsement	Perception of Justice	Psychological Contract Fulfillment
Brand Allegiance	-	-	-	-	-
Brand Consistent Behavior	-	-	-	-	-
Brand Endorsement	-	-	-	-	-
Perception of Justice	0.232	0.020	0.150	-	0.109
Psychological Contract Fulfillment	0.972	0.109	0.046	-	-

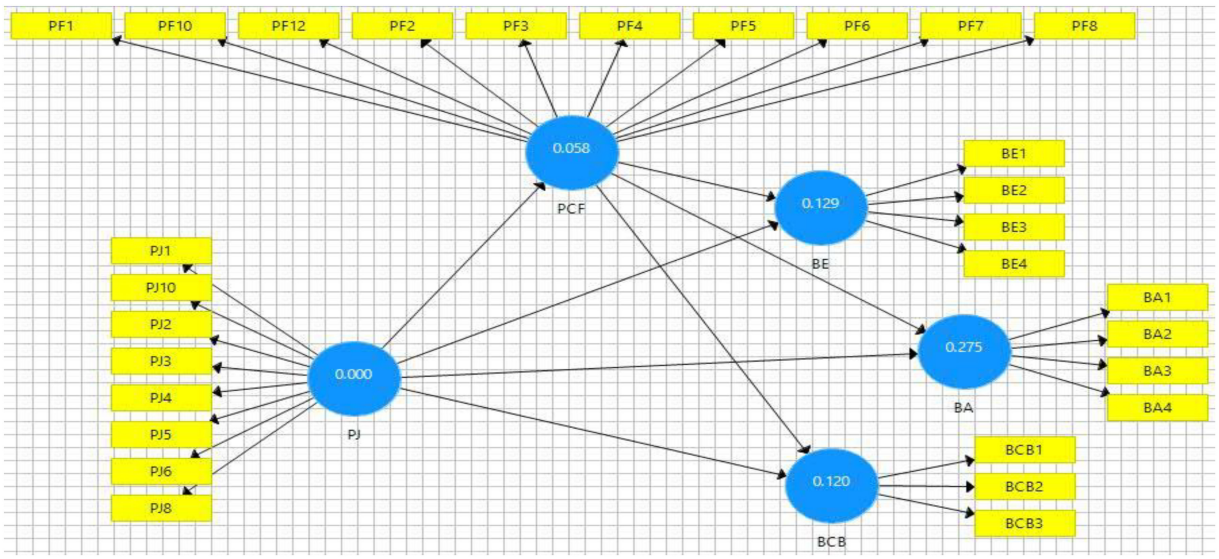

FIGURE 2 | R^2 depiction.

hence, this study could be a noble contributor in devising the employer and employee relationship based on justice. The other direct relationships of perception of justice among the employers and employees also produced some promising results and indicated that employees' perception of justice could lead to brand allegiance or brand loyalty.

The employees will not have any trouble while developing loyalty to their brands. The last direct hypothesis was about the perception of justice with brand-consistent behavior which was proved to be insignificant as, psychologically, employees did not feel secure about promoting the brand. Workers who are comfortable with the workplace environment are more likely to engage in behaviors that go beyond the job's technically defined standards (Beckett-Camarata, 2003). For example, brand-consistent behavior might be described as an employee's non-prescribed behavior that is consistent with the organization's brand values (Burmann et al., 2009). There could be some other factors as well, such as fluctuations in the behaviors of the employers, their behaviors with colleagues, and many others. Previously, this aspect was also neglected in the research.

The indirect effects of psychological contract fulfillment were also studied in this research. This indicates that psychological fulfillment mediates the relationship between perception of justice and three dimensions of EBBE benefits among employees. These findings are supported by the SET (Blau, 1964). These findings are in alignment with the previous findings that perception of justice has the potency to promote positive behaviors among employees (Bharadwaj, 2014; Erkmen, 2018). The indirect effects proved that psychological contract fulfillment could aid in the relationships of perception of justice and EBBE benefits, such as brand endorsement, brand allegiance, and brand-consistent behaviors of employees. The results also proved that the direct effects of perception of justice on brand-consistent behaviors could be rectified with the help of psychological contract fulfillment, indicating that if the contract is fulfilled along with the true justice by the employer, then this kind of relationship could be developed.

These results were in accordance with some previous research in which psychological contract fulfillment positively mediated the relationships in different contexts. Failing to maintain the commitments made in the psychological contract results in negative work outcomes, such as lower job satisfaction, organizational commitment, in-role competence, and organizational citizenship behaviors, as well as greater desire to quit or attrition (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004; Guest, 2004). Psychological contract fulfillment has given some promising and significant results in some past studies as a mediator (Ashfaq et al., 2018; Saeed, 2020; Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021; Gulzar et al., 2021).

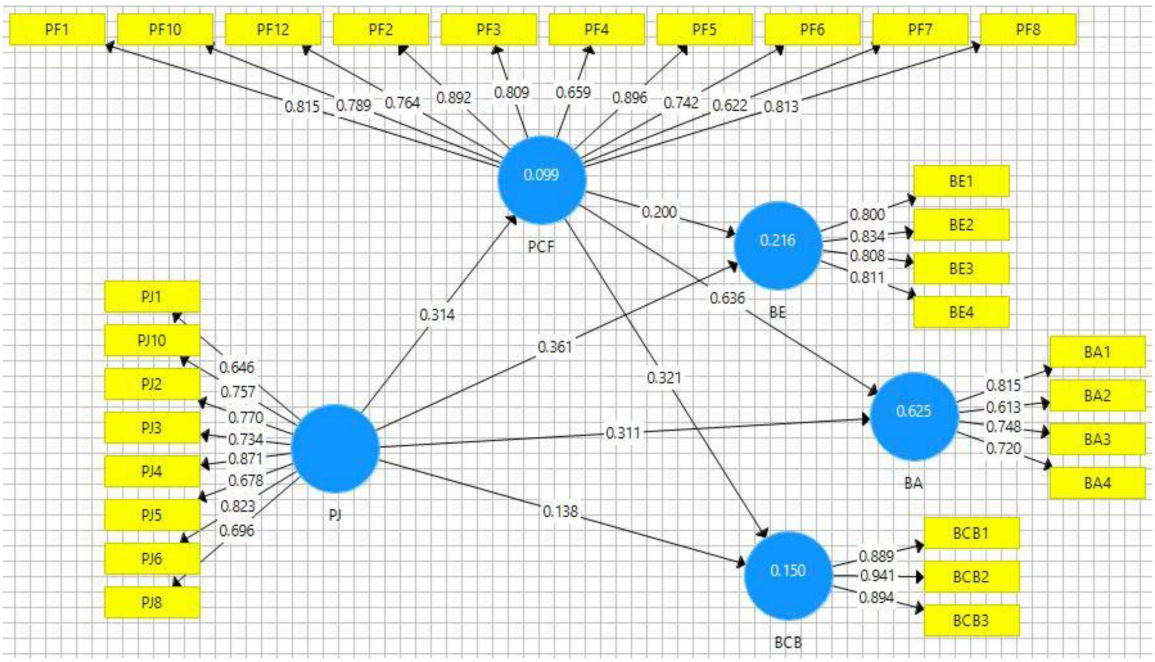

FIGURE 3 | Path estimates.

TABLE 7 | Path estimation.

Direct Paths				
Path	**Beta**	**SD**	**t**	**p**
Perception of Justice - > Brand Allegiance	0.312	0.046	6.745	0.000
Perception of Justice - > Brand Consistent Behavior	0.139	0.071	1.951	0.051
Perception of Justice - > Brand Endorsement	0.365	0.050	7.295	0.000
Perception of Justice - > Psychological Contract Fulfillment	0.318	0.058	5.461	0.000
Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Allegiance	0.639	0.044	14.478	0.000
Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Consistent Behavior	0.321	0.064	5.035	0.000
Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Endorsement	0.199	0.061	3.266	0.001
Indirect Path	**Beta**	**SD**	**t**	**p**
Perception of Justice - > Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Consistent Behavior	0.103	0.029	3.445	0.001
Perception of Justice - > Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Endorsement	0.064	0.025	2.564	0.010
Perception of Justice - > Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Allegiance	0.202	0.035	5.753	0.000
Total Paths				
Path	**Beta**	**SD**	**t**	**p**
Perception of Justice - > Brand Allegiance	0.515	0.051	9.955	0.000
Perception of Justice - > Brand Consistent Behavior	0.241	0.070	3.427	0.001
Perception of Justice - > Brand Endorsement	0.429	0.049	8.574	0.000

Theoretical and Practical Contribution

From a theoretical perspective, this study tends to add important theoretical strings to the body of knowledge by exploring the impact of the perception of justice in the service industry. This study includes that perception of justice promotes EBBE and employees tend to advocate their organization when they perceive that their organization is dealing with them fairly. Similarly, this study finds that it is not necessary that employees show their behavior in terms of brand-consistent behavior when they perceive that their firm is dealing with them with justice (De Cuyper et al., 2009). Another contribution of this study is related to the mediating role of psychological contract fulfillment, and it has been proved that employees perceive that their psychological contract is met when their organization deals with them through justice (Guest and Clinton, 2017). From the practical point of view, this study advocates that managers at the workplace should ensure the prevalence of justice to

TABLE 8 | Hypotheses testing.

		Coefficient (Beta)	S.D	*t*	*p*	Status
Hypotheses						
H1	Perception of Justice - > Brand Endorsement	0.365	0.050	7.295	0.000	Supported
H2	Perception of Justice - > Brand Allegiance	0.312	0.046	6.745	0.000	Supported
H3	Perception of Justice - > Brand Consistent Behavior	0.139	0.071	1.951	0.051	Not Supported
Mediation Hypotheses						
H4	Perception of Justice - > Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Endorsement	0.064	0.025	2.564	0.010	Not Supported
H5	Perception of Justice - > Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Allegiance	0.202	0.035	5.753	0.000	Supported
H6	Perception of Justice - > Psychological Contract Fulfillment - > Brand Consistent Behavior	0.103	0.029	3.445	0.001	Supported

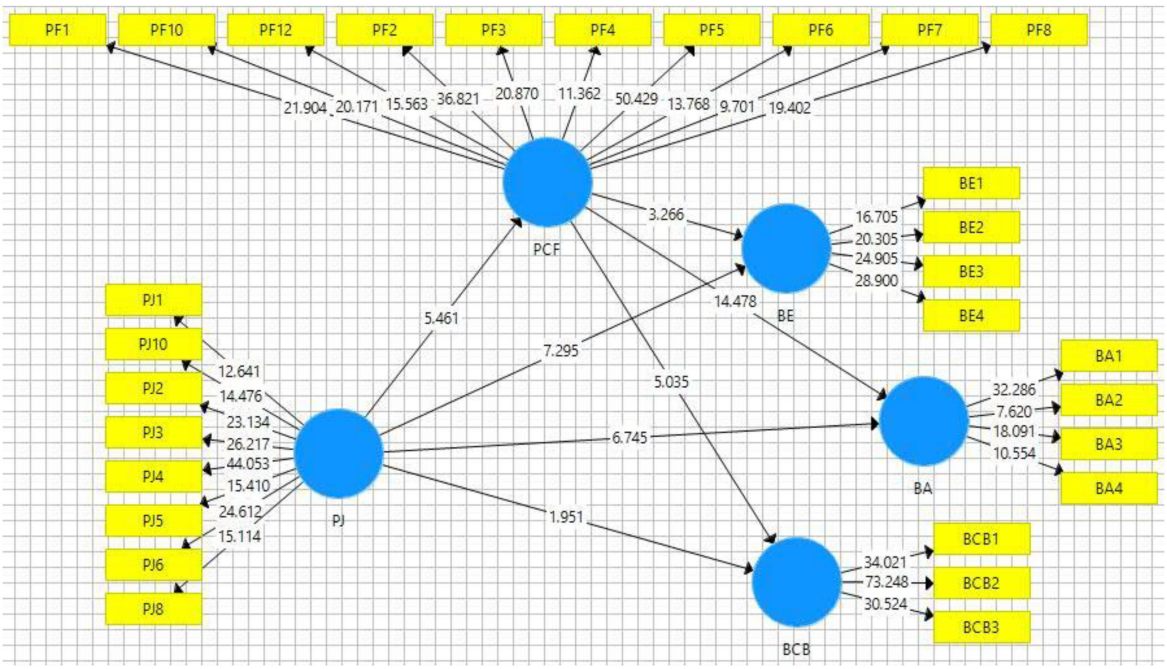

FIGURE 4 | Path significance.

improve the employees' perception regarding their psychological contract fulfillment needs so that brand-based equity should be promoted. These findings are consistent with the previous studies (Millward and Brewerton, 2000).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study also has some potential limitations. First, this study has used only service sector employee data for the operationalization of study constructs. Thus, in the future, other study constructs should also be considered. Similarly, collecting a larger sample size in the future could be a good future avenue for the researchers. Adding respondents from multiple sectors can provide deeper insights. Adding more mediating and moderating variables, such as commitment, satisfaction, and leadership styles (Sahu et al., 2017), can provide deeper insights. Previous studies have established that the psychological contract of permanent workers is different from the psychological contract of temporary workers based on the flexible firm model (Atkinson et al., 2004) and human capital theory (Sullivan and Bhagat, 1992).

While this study has not anticipated the difference between permanent and temporary workers, thus, in the future, obtaining the perception of permanent and contractual workers can provide a different array of results, because contractual employees might face difficulties in accessing specific training (Forret and Love, 2008) that in return might limit their chance to excel and get promoted in the long run (Virtanen et al., 2003). Tenure of employment has the potency to shatter the psychological contract fulfillment (Tekleab and Taylor, 2003); thus, in the future, investigating the perception of employees having greater experience in a particular organization can provide more detailed and deeper insights regarding the fulfillment of psychological contract and brand-based equity.

CONCLUSION

Based on empirical findings of this study, it can be concluded that employees perceive that their psychological contract has

been met when there is a higher level of justice. This fulfillment of psychological contract further nurtures positive behaviors among the employees, and they tend to advocate positively about their organizations and promote a positive image of the organization by speaking positively about the organization. Moreover, it can also be concluded that organizations should promote the perception of justice at the workplace to trigger positive among employees. Moreover, when individuals perceive that there is a reciprocal balance based on justice, they try to find themselves in more relational obligations as feeling to repay the organizations in response to justice (Blau, 1964) and they might tend to advocate the organization under brand-based equity. Thus, balanced psychological contracts (e.g., fulfilled psychological contracts) create brand-based equity (Shore et al., 2001, 2006). Hence, psychological contracts are fulfilled when there is a match between the obligations and entitlements.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LL contributed to the work on conceptual framework, data collection and draft writing, and agreed on the final version of manuscript.

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Teachers Self-Efficacy and Employee Brand Based Equity: A Perspective of College Students

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Teachers working in institutions like to affiliate themselves with their organizations taking into account their efficacy toward jobs along with encouraging students in studies. The main objective of the present study is to identify the teachers' self-efficacy on collective self-efficacy, academic psychological capital, and students' engagement which consequently affect brand-based equity. The population taken in this study is college students across China, deriving a sample size of 316. The sample has been selected on the basis of the convenience sampling technique. Smart PLS 3.3.5 software has been used in the present study to analyze data for structural equation modeling. The findings of the study had shown that teachers' self-efficacy does not have any impact on employee-based brand equity, however, significantly affects collective self-efficacy, academic psychological capital, and student engagement. Further, strong and moderate mediations have also been confirmed in the study for collective self-efficacy, academic psychological capital, student engagement between the relationships between teachers self-efficacy and brand based equity, however, collective self-efficacy and academic psychological capital could not find any mediating significance. The results have identified the significant role of teachers' self-efficacy for collective self-efficacy, academic psychological capital, and student engagement. These empirical findings suggest policy implications for the retention of students in colleges across China.

Keywords: self-efficacy, brand equity, student engagement, employee based brand equity, teachers, students

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INTRODUCTION

Various studies link effective brand-creation by businesses to increased stakeholder value and competitive advantage (Wiles et al., 2012). The literature indicates that brand equity serves a strategic function in assisting management in creating a competitive edge. The resource-based perspective of the business theorizes that a business's difficulty is to imitate capabilities that will allow it to build and retain superior advantages (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). College management is increasingly realizing that having a good knowledge of the brand equity notion may help them discover the characteristics that bring value to the brands and position them well in the market (Partenie, 2019; Dajani et al., 2021). As a result, college administration should have a better understanding of their brand equity in order to recruit students and faculty. Moreover, there is hardly any scientific publication on management comprehension of college brand equity, which

is fascinating. In particular, when it comes to brand management scholarship in emerging markets, less is known about the notion (Pinar et al., 2014).

Multiple studies have been conducted on the branding and marketing of institutions of higher learning over the years. The focus of preliminary studies appears to be focused on marketing and advertising aspects (Argenti, 2000; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019). Academic program repute, tuition, pamphlets, relationships between teachers, students, employees, and electronic media, as well as publicity, are all key variables for students when choosing a business school (Ryńca and Ziaeian, 2021). Other research works have focused on the role of interactions between teachers, students, staff, and the community in university marketing. Furthermore, amenities were discovered to be crucial for institution branding (Girard and Pinar, 2021). Conversely, there have also been concerns raised about the efficacy of such promotional operations, as well as the rising usage of similar catchphrases and slogans for university branding (Mingione et al., 2020). Whereas these investigations gave considerable information on the relevance of these characteristics for college branding and marketing but did not include evidence of how often institutions succeed in satisfying expectations on these factors. Furthermore, Hemsley-Brown et al. (2016) stated that research work exploring diverse sectors of schooling has expanded the knowledge of branding. Brand meaning, brand equity, the influence of educational brands on students, graduates, and staff, brand identity, and brand reputation were among the topics discussed (Naidoo et al., 2014; Balaji et al., 2016; Dean et al., 2016; Palmer et al., 2016; Plewa et al., 2016; Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Wilson and Elliot, 2016; Saurombe et al., 2017). According to Ng and Forbes (2009), the main value of university branding is the student learning experience.

Pinar et al. (2014) defined the fundamental value chain indicators that are necessary for building a solid college brand and brand equity relying on the marketing literature. Being part of the student college learning experience, the core value production activities are complemented by a supporting value chain (Ng and Forbes, 2009). Pinar et al. (2020) also highlighted key supportive actions for developing college branding. Both core and supportive elements are used in college branding in a manner that is compatible with and pertinent to the fundamental and supportive associations for service (Altaf et al., 2019). Functional areas, in fact, serve to distinguish and provide value to service brands (Altaf et al., 2019). Pinar et al. (2014) devised and verified a measurement scale for the main and supporting brand equity elements that are critical to the development of a successful university brand. Researchers did not give any data on how well these brand equity aspects performed in terms of meeting or failing to meet students' expectations in creating a solid university brand (Girard and Pinar, 2021).

Teacher self-efficacy (TSE) has been extensively researched in connection to a variety of variables. Highly effective teachers are risk-takers who instill higher expectations in their classrooms, which leads to improved student performance (Burić and Moè, 2020; Todd, 2021). In a larger sense, teaching self-efficacy is said to be linked to other qualities such as quality of work-life, perfection, and interpersonal skills. Teacher effectiveness, on the other hand, has been shown to be adversely connected with teacher burnout. When all of the research are combined, it's clear that there are still concerns with teachers' self-efficacy that have to be examined further (Fathi and Saeedian, 2020; Lazarides et al., 2020; Saidi, 2020). The preponderance of research on teachers' self-efficacy was quantifiable (Alibakhshi et al., 2020). Furthermore, as self-efficacy is situational and multidimensional, the objectivist instruments of investigation such as inferential or empirical research would not be suited for examining such an entity. As a result, the interpretive research paradigm and instruments may provide a more accurate representation of the notion (Alibakhshi et al., 2020).

Collective efficacy is an institution's conviction in its people's capacity to execute tasks effectively or a common understanding of a company's capacity to attain specified goals. "Any collective conviction in the accomplishment of a certain endeavor, which represented the intention of a community to execute a particular goal" (Fan, 2018). There are four causes of parameters influencing (Bandura, 1982). Affective mastery (previous performance), vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotive states are listed in the highest to the lowest order of significance. Collective effectiveness is formed by team members acquiring, storing, manipulating, and exchanging knowledge about one another, as well as their job, environment, processes, and prior performance. Collective efficacy has previously been studied as a mediator in the context of teachers' self-efficacy (Fan, 2018) therefore, the current research also tried to assess its mediating role in developing employee-based brand equity at the college level.

Students will be joining competitive, extremely quick, globalized, and unpredictable jobs. Employers are constantly relying on their human resources to develop and maintain a competitive edge. These human resource management must contribute something beyond technological skills, academic talents, contacts, and networking (social capital) to the table; they must also contribute strong psychological capital to the table. As a result, if the main purpose of higher education is to equip our students to be successful in the workforce, we must move beyond teaching technical and intellectual skills to focus on the development of a person's positive psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2013; Onivehu, 2020; Kang et al., 2021). In the current scope of our study, it was assumed that academic psychological capital could aid in the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and employee-based brand equity.

The term student engagement in class is a relatively recent term that has been characterized in a variety of ways by various scholars (Kahu and Nelson, 2017; Allen et al., 2018; Barkley, 2018). It can therefore be explained as a feeling of civic connectedness or participation, or as an experience depending on a variety of variables (Jain et al., 2013; Bear et al., 2019). Students are considered to be motivated to fully participate in their classrooms by a sense of engagement, which has been scientifically shown in a variety of circumstances and socioeconomic contexts. Effective social and academic outcomes are intimately linked to certain motivated engagement and suitability. This leads one to believe that perhaps the teacher's efforts are reflected in the students' emotions of participation

(Siddiqi, 2018). Due to these logical connections, it was assumed that by playing a mediating role, student engagement could aid in developing employee-based brand equity.

Horan et al. (2011) claimed that, while brand equity is a developing component of the research, it has only been studied from neither the viewpoint of consumers nor from the perspective of management. Furthermore, a review of the literature indicates that studies in the service industry, particularly in the college environment, are still scarce (Pinar et al., 2020). As a result, this work is poised to fill a gap in the literature. Understanding the advantages of marketing, empirical insights into university brand management methods, variables influencing student choice of an institution, and brand equity in schooling are just a few of the publications available. No study evaluated the relationship of teachers' self-efficacy in developing employee-based brand equity at higher educational institutes like colleges. Therefore, this study could drive a new dimension in the field of higher education employees based on brand equity.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Bandura (1977) sociological theories of changing behavior gave rise to the idea of self-efficacy. All of this relates to a teacher's confidence in his or her capacity to handle the tasks, responsibilities, and challenges that come with his or her professional job (e.g., didactical tasks, managing discipline problems in the class, etc.) (Caprara et al., 2006). This notion is influenced by a number of elements, including personality features, particularly personality traits, which have sparked increased scholarly interest in the subject. Djigić et al. (2014) discovered that instructors with greater degrees of openness to experience and conscientiousness reported a stronger sense of efficacy, based on the five-factor model of personality. Self-efficacy is a critical process for behavioral change. It causes cognitive events that cause behavior to be initiated in order to attain a specific objective. This cognitive event, on the other hand, is impacted by mastery experience gained from earlier good performance (Bandura, 1982).

Situational variables, verbal persuasion, and physiological sensations are also sources of self-efficacy beliefs. Such an approach stresses the interplay of personal (psychological) characteristics, individual behavior, and environmental influences (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2007). With the complex structure of self-efficacy in mind and its relationship to a person's view about his own efficacy in many realms of personal functioning or task completion, it is worthwhile to investigate the idea of teacher self-efficacy. Bandura created the measure of teacher self-efficacy among several other self-efficacy assessments in many areas (Bandura, 2006). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) created the idea of teachers' self-efficacy in light of the impact of self-efficacy on teacher efficacy. We assumed that teachers' self-efficacy is the major contributor to creating brand equity at institutions, therefore, based on this theory, we proposed teachers' self-efficacy as the independent variable of the current study influencing employee-based brand equity.

The resource-based theory has evolved through time to become a widely accepted research approach for establishing the link between efficiency and financial performance. The reorganization and incorporation of the resource create its uniqueness, allowing it to better adapt to the demands of a dynamic world (Barney, 1991) and, as a result, raise the chances of higher results (Song et al., 2005). Some researchers used the phrase "organizational unique competence" in 1957, and this idea was born (Song et al., 2005). Penrose proposed the "Theory of the Dynamic Growth of the Firm" in 1959, based on her economic theory, and defined Core Competency as an organization that obtains economic rents via the allocation and utilization of resources (Kor and Mahoney, 2004). Later, the resource-based theory was founded on this premise. According to resource-based theory research, the concept of human resources is indicated as innate organizational traits or as causal uncertainty, also known as the isolation mechanism (Lippman and Rumelt, 1982; Knott, 2003).

Nevertheless, why resources variety and uniqueness might boost the performance of the company, competitive edge, or organization performance requires greater clarity and investigation (Acedo et al., 2006). As per the above, the compatibility of the supply and demand of human capital between company and school would be represented in the college students' employment rate when the basic and professional skills of academically trained student resources fulfill the industry's need for student resources. All these things lead to academic psychological capital among students (Clarence et al., 2021), and academic PsyCap could lead to developing brand equity therefore, we utilized it as a mediator of the current study. The other mediators of the current study included student engagement and this variable was derived through flow theory (Shernoff et al., 2014). This stated that engaged students would be more helpful when getting user input through efficient teachers and would outflow the desired results.

Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Employee Based Brand Equity

The research of self-efficacy as well as its relationship to human behavior has expanded to include the efficacy of teachers, in particular. It has already been studied in terms of the impact on student achievement. Several studies have found a correlation between teacher efficacy and student accomplishment, which is the most important indicator of teacher effectiveness (Lee et al., 2013; Ababneh and Hackett, 2019; Madigan and Kim, 2021). Researchers have looked at the relationships between a teacher's level of efficacy and his or her intention to embrace educational advancement, teachable moment presenting and questioning, power to control the level of stress, desire to stay in the field, and educational commitment, special education recommendation, and predictions of student success, in addition to student-related issues like an accomplishment, sense of self-efficacy, encouragement, and so on (Kim et al., 2017; Donohoo, 2018). In a larger sense, teacher self-efficacy is seen to be linked to certain other qualities including job involvement, perfection, and interpersonal skills.

Teacher efficacy, on the other hand, has been linked to teacher burnout (Motallebzadeh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2017; Harrichand et al., 2021). Occupational stress has been related to overall self-efficacy, teachers' self-efficacy, and even group self-efficacy (Tzioti et al., 2010). Researchers also looked at the link between occupational stress and the three forms of self-efficacy, as well as instructors' evaluations of certain job values. The three categories of self-efficacy were shown to be adversely linked with the three characteristics of job burnout. Furthermore, Canrinus et al. (2012) looked at the relationship between significant measures of teachers' aspect of professional identification (work-related commitment, work satisfaction, and motivation change). Stirin Tzur et al. (2016) discussed the debate concerning the direction of self-influence efficacy on achievement. They hypothesized that self-efficacy does have a beneficial influence on performance when the reward is high, but a negative effect when the reward is low. None of the prior studies evaluated the role of teachers' self-efficacy on employee-based brand equity and provided us the opportunity to assess its impact on EBBE. Therefore we suggested the following hypothesis.

H_1: Teachers' self-efficacy has an association with EBBE

Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Collective Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy and collective efficacy are two distinct notions. Whereas self-efficacy refers to a person's conviction in their capacity to complete a task, collective efficacy refers to the institution's belief in its ability to do so (Bandura, 2001). Teachers' self-efficacy views in the educational setting are based on personal performance judgments, while collective efficacy is based on societal perceptions of school staff capabilities as a whole (Thornberg et al., 2020). Bandura (1982) stated in his early investigations that the origins of self-and collective efficacy are the same, and also that collective efficacy is embedded in self-efficacy. Participants' assessments of their group and the collective efficacy of respective organizations, particularly those in major management and leadership responsibilities, may be heavily impacted by their self-efficacy. The current study offered the following hypothesis based on the above findings.

H_2: Teachers' self-efficacy has an association with collective efficacy

Teachers Self-Efficacy and Academic PsyCap

Teachers' self-efficacy is basically a component of academic psychological capital and no prior research has evaluated the impact of teachers' self-efficacy on academic PsyCap in past. Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, of course, are not independent of other psychosocial factors that affect their productivity and commitment, including their competent ambitions, the acknowledgment and honor they believe they receive, and ultimately, the satisfaction they derive from their profession. Previous research has shown that a teacher's self-efficacy attitudes have a significant effect on the overall performance and enthusiasm (Mikus and Teoh, 2021). Various researchers have focused on the psychological capital of teachers in different contexts indicating that teachers' psychological capital could influence job satisfaction among school or college teachers (Aydin Sünbül and Aslan Gördesli, 2021), psychological capital promotes teachers' wellbeing (Shen et al., 2014), and PsyCap and teachers' effectiveness (Wang et al., 2014). This kind of relationship between academic PsyCap and teachers allowed us to develop a hypothesis to test the otherwise relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and academic PsyCap.

H_3: Teachers' self-efficacy has an association with academic psychological capital

Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Students Engagement

In comparison to the limited evidence that links teachers' self-efficacy and responsibility to student engagement practices, substantial evidence based on self-determination theory suggests that students who feel backed in their need for independence and comforted by their teachers are much more involved in learning and gaining knowledge more. Student engagement describes the degree to which students participate in the instructional experience, and it is a necessary condition for learning and achievement. Student engagement takes several forms: Emotional involvement is a measure of a student's enthusiasm for education activities (Flunger et al., 2019). Several other studies have also looked into the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and student's engagement in learning (Wang and Fredricks, 2014; Shoulders and Krei, 2015; Lauermann and Berger, 2021). Therefore based on this analogy, we devised the following hypothesis.

H_4: Teachers self-efficacy has an association with students' engagement

Mediating Roles of Collective Self-Efficacy, Academic PsyCap, and Student Engagement

People's shared confidence in their collective capacity to generate desired results is referred to as collective efficacy, which is based on social cognition theory (Chen, 2015). Collective effectiveness displays the ability of participants to act on one another's behalf irrespective of pre-network links, highlighting the potential to mobilize social support in times of need. As a result, whether individuals would devote these resources to specific activities, such as catastrophe preparedness, is determined by their perceived collective efficacy. Reported collective efficacy has been linked to pro-environmental behavior, self-reported wellness, recovery from post-traumatic psychological stress, and catastrophe preparation in empirical investigations (Kawachi et al., 2008; Cagney et al., 2009; Heid et al., 2017; Babcicky and Seebauer, 2020). As discussed in the previous section, collective self-efficacy is affected by teachers' self-efficacy and drawn from these studies, we assumed its mediating role between teachers' self-efficacy and employee-based brand equity.

PsyCap is thought to be flexible and open to development (state-like), implying that it is not static and is more receptive

to change in terms of positive resources and development via brief intervention. The influence of PsyCap has mostly been evaluated in terms of management satisfaction, productivity, and well-being, as well as at the organizational level among personnel. Research from such studies indicates that there is a positive relationship between these three dimensions (Georgiou and Nikolaou, 2019; Gomes da Costa et al., 2021). Surprisingly, research on the impact of PsyCap on university students' well-being and academic performance has been scarce thus far. Some of the researchers looked at the relationship between PsyCap and students' grades. The findings reveal that PsyCap is a favorable indicator of students' grades, with greater PsyCap levels indicating better grades, and vice versa (Vanno et al., 2014). PsyCap's involvement as a possible mediator in the relationship between academic stress and psychological symptoms (e.g., anxiety, somatic symptoms), physical ailments (e.g., migraine, queasy stomach), and life satisfaction have been investigated in a different way (Riolli et al., 2012).

Several scholars have analyzed the mediating role of students engagement previously (Siddiqi, 2018). Students' engagement is long been seen as the most important educational result since it demonstrates that they are studying and performing well (Reeve and Tseng, 2011). According to scientists, student engagement seems to have a direct influence on academic success (Khoza, 2018). Students' participation in literature has been described using a variety of categorizations. Student engagement, according to Kuh et al. (2008), is measured by how much performance and energy students devote to educational activities (Collaborating and Interacting). Students' involvement, according to Fredricks et al. (2004) is a mix of several components such as emotional, social, and intellectual engagement. Some other researchers such as García-Martínez et al. (2021) utilized students' engagement as mediators in their contexts. Though, no prior research evaluated the impact of collective self-efficacy, academic PsyCap, and student engagement on employee-based brand equity but all the supporting literature discussed above allowed us to develop the following hypothesis suggesting mediating roles of these variables.

H_5: Collective self-efficacy mediates the relationship of teachers' self-efficacy and EBBE

H_6: Academic PsyCap mediates the relationship of teachers' self-efficacy and EBBE

H_7: Student engagement mediates the relationship of teachers' self-efficacy and EBBE

The following conceptual model (**Figure 1**) has been formed based on the above literature and hypotheses.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the aim of this study, the data was collected from Chinese college students using the convenience sampling technique (Avotra et al., 2021). The population of Chinese college students has been targeted because they are the best stakeholder in the university and faculties there (Baig and Waheed, 2016). The convenience sampling technique has been recommended due to the pros it offers to the researcher; for example, it is cost-effective and the respondents are easily available. Furthermore, this technique allows the researcher to redo the data collection if any issue occurs at a later stage (Nawaz et al., 2020; Yingfei et al., 2021). However, in this study, the data was collected once making it a cross-sectional study. The study offers the causal frameworks measuring the effects of independent variables on the dependent variables, thus following a positivist philosophy of research supporting the deductive approach. The data collection had been administered by the researcher to minimize spurious

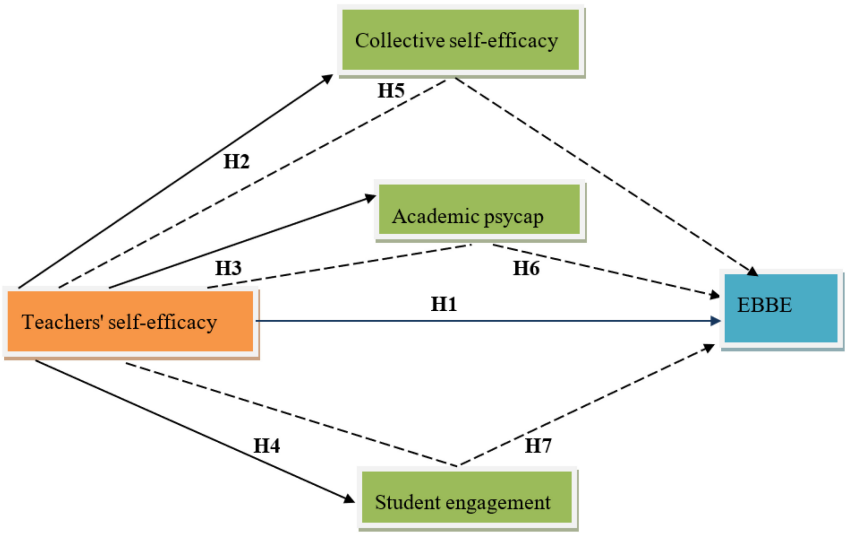

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual model.

results. The questionnaires were distributed to the potential respondents giving an orientation about the purpose of the study taking consent from the potential respondents if they are willing to participate. The anonymity of the respondents had been ensured by not giving an option to put their names on the questionnaire. The cover letter explained that the study is voluntary, data will be kept confidential, and data collected will be used for the analysis of the study only, thus meeting the criteria of ethical consideration of research. These steps helped to avoid bias and social desirability (Nawaz et al., 2020; Yingfei et al., 2021). A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to the college students and 351 questionnaires were received. Participants were reached through personal visits and emails. After screening, 316 questionnaires were selected for analysis. Therefore, the usable questionnaires obtained from participants are 79%. Regardless of any social/professional influences, the data were collected on the free consent and willingness of the respondents. The authors compared with respect to late and early responses and no difference was found. The informed consent of the participants was implied through investigation achievement.

Statistical Tool

The statistical tool used in this study for the analysis is Smart PLS 3.3.5 as it provides robust results and is user-friendly. This software helped the researchers to carry out the analysis using the partial least square structural equation modeling technique. Further, it treats small data with equal robustness as larger sample sizes (Nawaz et al., 2019; An et al., 2021). Smart PLS evaluates the results in two stages, i.e., measurement model and structural model stages. The first stage of the measurement model gives insights into the internal consistency and validity of the data obtained through questionnaires. The second stage, structural model measurement, gives the output for the hypotheses, formulated in the literature, for their acceptance or rejection based on the inbuilt statistical estimations considering *t*-test, *p*-values, etc.

Measurement

The scales used in the present study have been adapted from past studies. The details for all scales have been given in the following.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

The shorter version teacher's self-efficacy scale (five items) is adopted from Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) this scale uses five points Likert scale to measure the teacher's self-efficacy.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is measured on 5-point Likert (1 indicates I totally disagree and 5 indicates I totally agree) scale with five statements from Gunuc and Kuzu (2015). These five statements measure the class engagement and emotional engagement of college students.

Academic Psychological Capital

This scale is adopted from Luthans et al. (2012) with five items and this scale uses five responses they are Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

Employee Based Brand Equity

The scale is based on questions adopted from the study by Mohan and Sequeira (2016). Ten items are used to measure different aspects of employee-based brand equity. A 5-point Likert scale is used 5 (Strongly Agree) and 1 (Strongly Disagree).

Collective Self-Efficacy

Collective self-efficacy has been defined as the group's belief that it can perform the tasks and goals successfully. This scale is adopted from Little and Madigan (1997) and it has five items measured on a 9-point Likert scale one (Not at all confident) to nine (Completely confident).

Demographic Analysis

The demographic profile of the respondents has been analyzed based on the two main characteristics of age and gender. The target population of the study was students who are generally characterized based on these two categories. Regarding age, the highest number of respondents was from the age group 18–25 making up 58.8% of the respondents. Regarding gender, male and female participation had been almost equal making 51.26% of male respondents and 48.73% of female respondents (see **Table 1**).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Measurement Model

The variance-based PLS-SEM is used in Smart-PLS in order to calculate the reliability of the measurements through Cronbach's alpha, discriminant validity, convergent validity, and indicator reliability (Hair et al., 2014). These measures help is validate the measurement model of our framework (see **Figure 2**).

The measurement model has generated the results for the reliability and validity of the scales used in this study. **Table 2** exhibits these results. These results have been estimated through factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and the variance inflation factor (VIF). According to different authors, for results to be valid, one of the measuring criteria is that the items show a factor loading of above 0.5 (Jordan and Spiess, 2019). The present study shows that all the items included in the study have shown factor loading of above 0.5 which shows the items are measuring the dimension of the variable that is expected to measure. Furthermore, the AVE values, according to the authors, are said to be more than 0.5 to show that items measure a variance more than the errors in that

TABLE 1 | Demographic analysis.

Demographic variable	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	18–25	86	18.2
	26–30	145	30.7
	31–35	109	23.0
	36 and above	74	15.6
Gender	Male	429	90.7
	Female	44	9.2

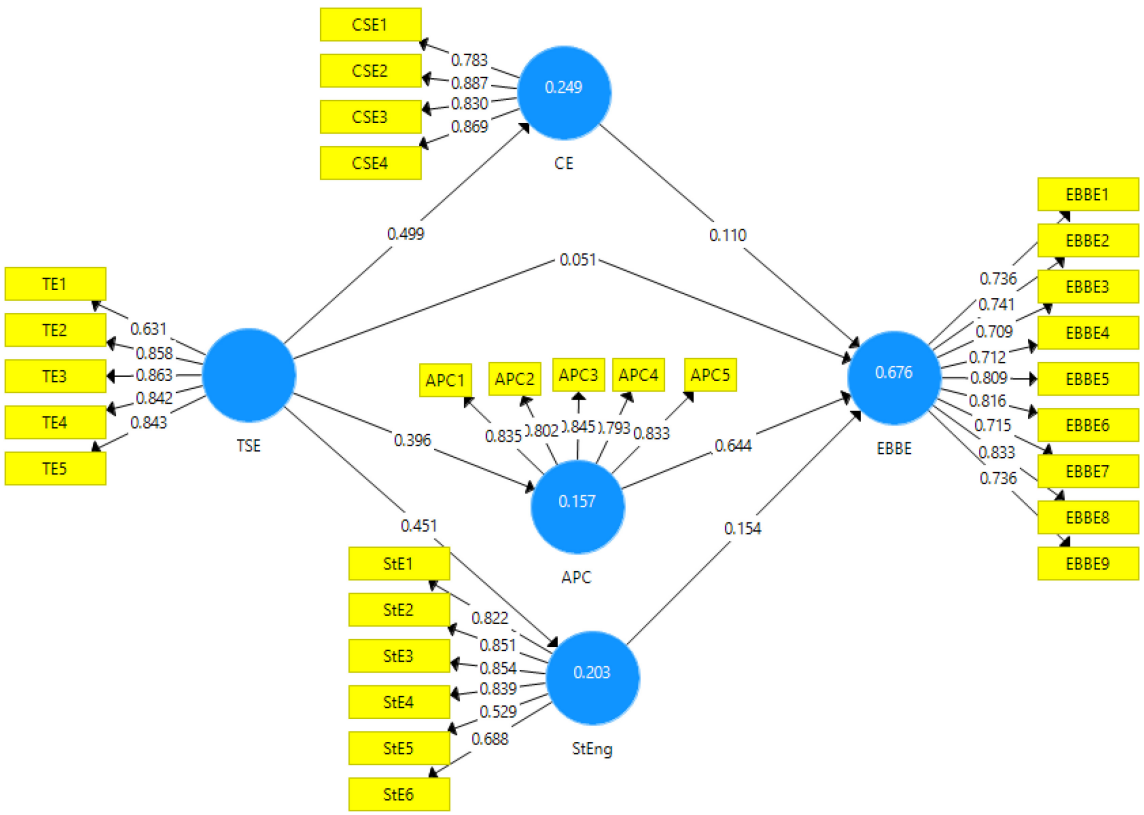

FIGURE 2 | Output of measurement model.

particular variable (Dash and Paul, 2021). AVEs for the present study have also been calculated to be above 0.5 indicating an adequate measure of variance. Furthermore the VIF, according to authors, has been said to show values less than 5 as it indicates the moderate correlation of the items with each other (Craney and Surles, 2007). Hence, in this study, the VIF values reported by the software are all below five, thus showing that the items of each variable are moderately correlated with each other.

Moving to the internal consistency of the variables used in this study, the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability have been used to check the reliability of the variables used. According to past research, the cut-off values set for the acceptance of the criteria for a variable to be reliable are 0.7. Peterson and Kim (2013) showed that the statistics shown corresponding to these tests should be more than the said value. In this study, both the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability show statistics above 0.7; hence, indicating that the scales used for the present study will generate similar results when will be used in the future thus establishing the reliability of the measured constructs.

In addition to the aforementioned tests used (factor loading, AVE, and VIF) used for validating the scales, the Fornell and Larcker Criteria and hetero trait mono trait ratios have also been introduced in the present study to authenticate the results obtained by previous tests. The Fornell and Larcker Criteria indicate the correlation among the variables used in the study (Henseler et al., 2015). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the results are said to show valid correlations among the variables when the first value in each column is the highest than the rest of the beneath values. The present study results show for Fornell and Larcker Criteria have been reported in **Table 3** and meet the acceptance criteria and the bold values reported in the table show that the variables used in this study are valid.

Similarly, another measure used to check the validity of the scale is the HTMT ratio (Henseler et al., 2015). The results of the test indicate that the scales used in this study to measure the concepts are valid. The acceptance of the HTMT ratio is based on the values generated for this test which should be less than 0.85. In the present study, the values obtained show the statistics of less than 0.85, hence, endorsing the validations proposed by the previous tests (see **Table 4**).

Furthermore, the model fit of the study has been measured through r-square, f-square, and q-square values. R-square indicates how well does the data obtains fits in the regression line (Archer et al., 2021). The variable academic psychological capital shows that the data 16% fits the regression line. The highest fit has been obtained for the variable employee-based brand equity which shows a 40% fit. The following data fit is obtained for collective self-efficacy (25%) and the student's engagement variable shows 20.5%. The f-square values indicated the strength of the relationship among the variables (Shukla, 2021). These are divided into three categories as small (f-square = 0.02), medium (f-square = 0.15), and high effect

TABLE 2 | Model measurement.

Construct/ Indicators	Loadings/Alpha	Composite reliability	AVE	VIF
Academic psychological capital	**α = 0.882**	**0.912**	**0.675**	
APC1	0.834			2.908
APC2	0.802			2.482
APC3	0.845			2.094
APC4	0.794			1.806
APC5	0.832			2.603
Employee based brand equity	**α = 0.906**	**0.922**	**0.570**	
EBBE1	0.766			2.218
EBBE2	0.776			3.010
EBBE3	0.740			2.459
EBBE4	0.714			1.661
EBBE5	0.782			2.923
EBBE6	0.791			3.232
EBBE7	0.684			2.108
EBBE8	0.808			3.590
EBBE9	0.725			1.928
Student engagement	**α = 0.859**	**0.897**	**0.598**	
SE1	0.822			2.538
SE2	0.851			2.697
SE3	0.854			2.598
SE4	0.840			2.563
SE5	0.728			1.799
SE5	0.688			2.087
Collective self-efficacy	**α = 0.864**	**0.908**	**0.711**	
CSE1	0.785			1.580
CSE2	0.887			2.827
CSE3	0.830			2.213
CSE4	0.868			2.352
Teachers self-efficacy	**α = 0.867**	**0.905**	**0.659**	
TSE1	0.652			1.323
TSE2	0.857			2.360
TSE3	0.858			2.465
TSE4	0.835			2.302
TSE5	0.837			2.272

Bold indicates the relationship between variables.

(f-square $\geq$ 0.35). For the present study, the independent variable teachers' efficacy has shown moderate effect sizes with its corresponding dependent variables. The highest f-square value has been obtained for the relationship between teachers self-efficacy and collective efficacy (0.33) followed by the relationship between student engagement (0.25) and academic psychological capital (0.19). In addition, employee-based brand equity has shown a moderate relationship with collective self-efficacy (0.12), and weak relationship with student engagement (0.039), and a weak relationship with academic psychological capital (0.015). Furthermore, the q-square shows the predictive relevance (Hasan and Bao, 2020) and it is suggested to be greater than zero to show the relevance of the variables. In this study, all the variables have shown predictive relevance of more than zero (Academic psychological capital = 0.095, collective efficacy = 0.166, employee-based brand equity = 0.203, student engagement = 0.114, and teachers self-efficacy = 0.134).

Structural Model

The software Smart PLS, in the structural model, uses bootstrapping technique to test if the data obtained support the hypotheses or not. In the present study, the statistics used to check the significance of the hypotheses are β values, t-statistics, and p-values. The acceptance criterion for t-statistic is that it should be more than 1.92, p value less than 0.05, VAF (variance accounted for) (Saricali et al., 2020). The data is run for bootstrapping at 5,000 subsamples at a 95% confidence interval (see **Figure 3**).

Table 5 reports the direct effects of the study. The first direct effect is between the teachers self-efficacy and the employee based brand equity indicating insignificant results with t = 1.16 and $p > 0.05$. The second, third, and fourth hypotheses of the study indicate the direct effects of teachers self-efficacy on collective self-efficacy (β = 0.499, t-value = 8.24, p = 0), academic psychological capital (β = 0.396, t-value = 7.29, p = 0) and students engagement (β = 0.451, t-value = 7.12, p = 0) have been accepted indicating strong direct effects.

The indirect effects of the study indicating the mediation effects between the relationship of teachers self-efficacy and EBBE have been reported in **Table 6**. These hypotheses have been accepted/rejected based on the values of β, the t-statistic, variance accounted for, and p-value. There have been mentioned three interpretations of VAF weak (<20%), moderate (20% < VAF < 80%), and strong (>80%). The table shows that collective self-efficacy (β = 0.341, t-value = 6.22, p = 0) and student engagement (β = 0.172, t-value = 3.57, p = 0) have moderately mediated the relationship between teachers self-efficacy and EBBE. On the other hand, academic psychological capital has strongly mediated the relationship between teachers self-efficacy and EBBE with β = 0.113, t-value = 2.27, p = 024).

DISCUSSION

This research is a novel approach to determining employee based brand equity in educational institutes. University or college brand equity is slightly a newer concept in which educational institute develops as a brand. The faculty and other stakeholders of the educational institute develop brand equity in one or another way. College and universities' management is increasingly realizing that having a good knowledge of brand equity may help them discover the characteristics that bring value to the brands and position them well in the market (Partenie, 2019; Dajani et al., 2021). Moreover, there is hardly any scientific publication on management comprehension of college brand equity, which is fascinating. In particular, when it comes to brand management in emerging markets, less is known about the notion (Pinar et al., 2014). Therefore, this

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker Criteria).

	APC	CE	EBBE	StEng	TSE
APC	**0.822**				
CE	0.462	**0.843**			
EBBE	0.480	0.562	**0.755**		
StEng	0.728	0.613	0.562	**0.773**	
TSE	0.400	0.500	0.570	0.453	**0.812**

APC, academic psychological capital; CE, collective Efficacy; EBBE, employee based brand equity; StEng, student engagement; TSE, teachers self–efficacy. Bold indicates the relationship between variables.

TABLE 4 | Discriminant validity (HTMT ratio).

	APC	CE	EBBE	StEng	TSE
APC					
CE	0.502				
EBBE	0.502	0.610			
StEng	0.847	0.696	0.617		
TSE	0.438	0.577	0.885	0.525	

APC, academic psychological capital; CE, collective Efficacy; EBBE, employee based brand equity; StEng, student engagement; TSE, teachers self-efficacy.

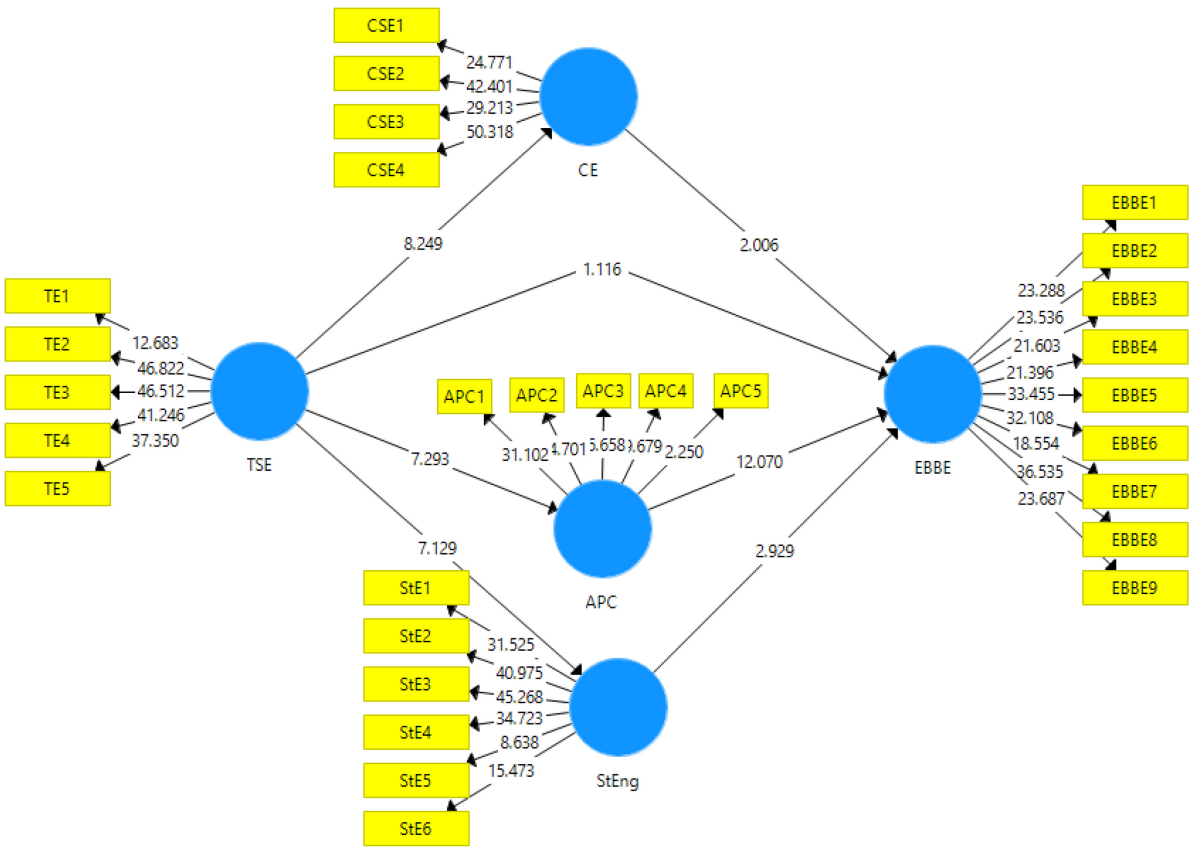

FIGURE 3 | Output of structural model bootstrapping.

study was carried out to evaluate the role of teachers in terms of their efficacy in a contribution to brand equity. The specific dimension of brand equity, i.e., employee-based brand equity was the main focus of this research. Different direct and indirect relationships of efficacy and EBBE were analyzed in this research based on the responses from college students

TABLE 5 | Direct effects.

Hypothesis	Beta	*SD*	*T* statistics	*P*-values
H_1: Teacher's self-efficacy → employee based brand equity	0.051	0.046	1.116	0.265
H_2: Teacher's self-efficacy → collective self-efficacy	0.499	0.060	8.249	0.000
H_3: Teacher's self-efficacy → academic pschyCap	0.396	0.054	7.293	0.000
H_4: Teacher's self-efficacy → student's engagement	0.451	0.063	7.129	0.000

TABLE 6 | Indirect effects.

Hypothesis	Beta	VAF (%)	*SD*	*T* statistics	*P*-values
H_5: Teacher's self-efficacy → collective self-efficacy→ employee based brand equity	0.341	51.83%	0.055	6.227	0.000
H_6: Teacher's self-efficacy → academic PsyCap→ Employee based brand equity	0.172	83.33%	0.048	3.573	0.000
H_7: Teacher's self-efficacy → student engagement→ employee based brand equity	0.113	57.61%	0.050	2.270	0.024

of China. The direct relationship of teachers' self-efficacy in building employee based brand equity was the main focus of this research.

The results provided significant insights into the role of teachers' self-efficacy in higher educational institutes such as colleges and universities. Developing college and universities into the brand and promoting employee-based brand equity in these institutes got new support from current research. Multiple studies have been conducted on the branding and marketing of institutions of higher learning over the years. The focus of the preliminary studies appears to be focused on marketing and advertising aspects only (Argenti, 2000; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019). Academic program repute, tuition, pamphlets, relationships between teachers, students, employees, and electronic media, as well as publicity, were all key variables for students when choosing a business school (Ryńca and Ziaeian, 2021). Some other research focused on the role of interactions between teachers, students, staff, and the community in university marketing. Furthermore, amenities were discovered to be crucial for institution branding (Girard and Pinar, 2021). Previously the only focus was on evaluating the effectiveness of teaching but by that time research on self-efficacy as well as its relationship to human behavior expanded to include the efficacy of teachers, in particular.

It was already studied in terms of the impact on student achievement. Several studies found a correlation between teacher efficacy and student accomplishment, which was the most important indicator of teacher effectiveness (Lee et al., 2013; Ababneh and Hackett, 2019; Madigan and Kim, 2021). The other contributors to current research aided in developing employee-based brand equity. The direct relationship of teachers' self-efficacy with collective efficacy provided a strong indicator that if teachers are efficient than it does have an impact on others collectively. Teachers' self-efficacy views in the educational setting were based on personal performance evaluations, while collective efficacy was based on societal perceptions of school staff capabilities as a whole (Thornberg et al., 2020). Therefore, results proved that teachers' self-efficacy would be useful for developing collective efficacy. The impact of teachers' self-efficacy on academic psychological capital was also addressed in this research which indicated that if teachers were efficient then it helped in developing psychological capital academically. If teachers had no self-efficacy then it would not have helped in developing academic PsyCap.

Similar studies have also been carried out in past in different perspectives in which psychological capital induced self-efficacy among teachers of higher education (Aydin Sünbül and Aslan Gördesli, 2021). Various researchers focused on psychological capital of teachers in different contexts indicating that teachers' psychological capital could influence job satisfaction among school or college teachers (Aydin Sünbül and Aslan Gördesli, 2021), psychological capital promoting teachers' wellbeing (Shen et al., 2014), and PsyCap and teachers' effectiveness (Wang et al., 2014). It was also evident from the results that teachers' self-efficacy had a significant contribution toward engaging the students which produced useful outcomes among students. Several other studies also looked in to the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and students engagement in learning (Wang and Fredricks, 2014; Shoulders and Krei, 2015; Lauermann and Berger, 2021). The indirect effects of three mediators were also studied in current research. All three mediators provided a handful of help in directing the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy with employee-based brand equity.

Previously, no research was carried out in a similar fashion to this research in which collective self-efficacy could mediate the relationship of EBBE. Though, collective efficacy showed that it was linked to pro-environmental behavior, self-reported wellness, recovery from post-traumatic psychological stress, and catastrophe preparation in empirical investigations (Kawachi et al., 2008; Cagney et al., 2009; Heid et al., 2017; Babcicky and Seebauer, 2020). Similarly, academic PsyCap and student engagement were also not utilized in a similar fashion to this research but both of these significantly mediated the relationship of teachers' self-efficacy with developing EBBE. While, PsyCap's involvement as a possible mediator in the relationship between academic stress and psychological symptoms (e.g., anxiety, somatic symptoms), physical ailments (e.g., migraine, queasy stomach), and life satisfaction were investigated from different perspectives (Riolli et al., 2012). Likewise, several scholars analyzed the mediating role of students' engagement from different perspectives such as reported by Siddiqi (2018).

Practical Implications

The present study offers certain practical implications for universities and other organizations. For example, first of all, universities should conduct frequent seminars and workshops that actively involve the faculties and motivate them toward their jobs by strengthening their commitment to academics. Second, universities administration is increasingly realizing that having a good understanding of brand equity may help them in practicing such activities that bring value to their universities and position them better in the overall market. Thirdly, the faculties and universities should design such teaching methodologies that include team assignments that encourage the students to actively engage and learn how to participate and perform in teams, hence motivating teachers to give their best toward better performance.

Theoretical Contribution

The present study strongly contributes by offering a scientific study to understand comprehensively the role of teachers self-efficacy in university brand equity. Particularly the brand management of universities in the markets is still an emerging concept. The present study has availed the opportunity to measure these relationships. In this regard, first of all, the present study has established that teacher self-efficacy contributes to the brand equity of universities indicating the mediation of academic psychological capital being the most important factor followed by student engagement and collective self-efficacy. Furthermore, it has also been established that teachers self-efficacy is an important contributing factor in collective self-efficacy followed by academic psychological contract and student engagement.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Along with the theoretical and practical importance of the study, there are some limitations as well that should be taken care of in future studies. The present study has used a convenience sampling technique which has its own drawbacks. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to conduct the study in a similar fashion to probability sampling to avoid any biases in results and offer more generalizable results. Secondly, teachers self-efficacy could not find any effect on the employ based brand equity being the major hypothesis of the study. Therefore, in future it should be tested in different settings to understand if this direct relationship exists between these two variables. Thirdly, moderation should be introduced in the framework offering more rigorous and robust results. The potential moderating variables could be organizational support, leadership, and also ethics will be an interesting moderating variables to check if the effect of teachers' self-efficacy on student engagement is moderated. Furthermore, it will be interesting to add other mediating variables in the study like psychological contract breach, workplace incivility, or work stress.

CONCLUSION

The teachers of higher education tend to associate with their institutions having higher self-efficacy toward their responsibilities hence giving students the confidence to participate in the class activities. The present study has examined the effect of teachers self-efficacy on the employee-based brand equity which could not find significance in this relationship. Moreover, teachers self-efficacy found significant effects on collective self-efficacy and academic psychological capital indicating that teachers involved in teaching activities create the feeling among students of having some academic achievement. Furthermore, teachers self-efficacy also found significant effect on student engagement showing that if teachers are self-motivated for doing their job makes students engage in their academic activities even more. Regarding the mediating effects of the study, collective self-efficacy, academic psychological capital, and student engagement were found to have a significant role in the relationship between teachers' elf efficacy and employee based brand equity indicating how academic achievements and engagements of the students make teachers associate themselves with their institutions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by X'ian University of Architecture and Technology, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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How Organizations Create Employee Based Brand Equity: Mediating Effects of Employee Empowerment

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In the present era, organizations are trying to get success in the market by creating a competitive advantage; however, it has been argued in the literature that the fashion of creating competitive advantage through tangible resources is now gaining unpopularity among organizations and there is a shift toward human capital for organizational competitiveness. This study has made an attempt toward this focus and investigated the phenomenon of employee brand-based equity. For this purpose, data have been collected from the manufacturing sector through personally administrated questionnaires. In total, 400 questionnaires were floated. After discarding the partially filled questionnaires, 325 questionnaires were left, which were later analyzed on the basis of the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach by assessing the measurement model and structural model. The outcome of this study revealed that psychological attachment, internal communication, and employee organization fit bring positive change in employee attitudes and it promotes employee brand-based equity. Similarly, it has also been proved that employee empowerment also plays a mediating role.

Keywords: employee brand-based equity, internal communication, employee–organization fit, employee empowerment, psychological attachment

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the era we are living in is full of competition (Erdogan and Bauer, 2005). Organizations are trying to get success in the market by creating a competitive advantage. In addition, to be more competitive in the market, the real focus is now shifted toward "skills and knowledge." This shift of thoughts makes human capital (such as employees) more valuable for organizational competitiveness. The unique attributes of employees assist the organizations in the maintenance of sustainability (King and Grace, 2009). The brand of an organization could be strengthened by the collection of unique skills and knowledge and could be considered as the main source of organizational sustainability (King and Grace, 2010).

Wilden et al. (2006) point out that higher brand equity is recognized as a valuable source of a successful brand. Brand equity is used to gauge the indicator of future success and sustainability of the organization. In other words, Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) acknowledged brand equity as a valuable asset that is more worthy than tangible assets of the firm. Huang and Sarigöllü (2014) highlighted that brand awareness is the preceding stage for the creation of brand equity. Furthermore, they argue that efficient awareness and knowledge of employees about the brand can increase the overall brand performance of an organization, which, in turn, can play a vital role in the long-term sustainability of the firm. Additionally, efficient brand awareness and knowledge

of employee can also affect the purchase intentions of potential users, as Verma (2021) point out that brand awareness has strong associations with purchasing intentions of customers. Consumers' engagement as a result of employee efficient brand management activities could be a positive indicator for the building process of brand equity. For the creation of brand equity, firms invest a heavy amount of resources to deliver the promise in an accurate manner. King and Grace (2009) point out that it is not just important for the employee to deliver service, but it is important to deliver according to the promise of the organization. The skills and knowledge of employees have a significant role in the creation of brand equity (Tavassoli et al., 2014). Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) shed further light and said that the importance of employee-based brand equity (EBBE) cannot be ignored. However, scholars acknowledged that despite the importance of EBBE, little research has been found in the literature (Silverthorne, 2004; King and Grace, 2010; Erkmen, 2018). In addition, the literature currently available is depicted brand equity from a financial and consumer perspective (King and Grace, 2010). King and Grace (2009) call attention to the third perspective of brand equity, which is called EBBE. The employees can play a critical role in brand management, which, in turn, could be used as a strategic weapon for firm sustainability.

There is a dearth of consideration in the literature about value addition with the perspective of effort placed in results of EBBE. This article seeks to extend the literature on EBBE by shedding the light on the creation process of EBBE in organizations. The main purpose of this study is to illuminate the process by which organizations can create EBBE. Poulis and Wisker (2016) point out that this is the time to consider the employees as the most valuable asset in the building process of brand equity. Furthermore, they argue that the building of brand equity initiates inside of organizations. The real insight of this initiative is employees as they are considered brand ambassadors of the firm (King and Grace, 2010). In the building process of EBBE, it is very important to determine the viewpoint of employees about the brand of the firm. In other words, it is worthy to know the interpretation and identification of the brand from the employee's perspective.

Poulis and Wisker (2016) point out that the EBBE building process influences positively when employees have psychological attachment with the organization. Psychological attachment is an emotional bond of the employee with the organization (Bennett and Durkin, 2000). This emotional bond of employees could be helpful in the building of EBBE as King and Grace (2010) acknowledged that organizational brand is considered as a cluster of emotional benefits. When employees feel emotional attachment and belonging with the organization, they considered themselves as a valuable part of the organization. Lashley (1999) highlighted that emotionally attached employees feel more enthusiastic and empowered. Furthermore, he argues that more empowered employees are more passionate about the fulfillment of responsibilities. The positive behavior of employees has a constructive role in internal brand management and also in the creation of EBBE (King and Grace, 2010). According to the arguments of Erkmen (2018), the establishment process of EBBE and brand management is also intensely influenced by the internal communication of the organization. Additionally, organizations communicate brand knowledge to employees through human resource management (HRM) activities. When organizations communicate knowledge to employees either explicitly or implicitly, they are actually transferring the brand values to employees. Men (2014) revealed that effective internal communication plays a key role in improving employees' productivity and their level of satisfaction. Employee satisfaction and job fit are considerable outcomes of effective internal communication as they both are positive indicators of EBBE (Lee et al., 2019; Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020). When employees feel that they are fit for a particular organization, their level of productivity also increases as Silverthorne (2004) points out that employee job fit is a positive indicator of productivity.

This study contributes to the literature on the EBBE building process in four ways. First, this study attempts to highlight the concept of EBBE and tries to shed further light on the importance of EBBE for organizations. Brand equity literature is enriched with financial-based and customer-based brand equity. However, this study tries to draw attention to the need for the creation of EBBE in the organization. Second, this study offers an EBBE framework for a better understanding of how organizations can create EBBE. This study proposed that psychological attachment, internal communication, and employee–organization fit are three determinants of EBBE. The aim of this study behind these three determinants is to find out how these three positive attributes help out in the building process of EBEE. Additionally, this study used these three variables as independent variables to figure out the importance of the building process of EBBE for the organizations. Based on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), when employees are emotionally and psychologically attached to organizations, it is a positive signal of employees toward the creation of EBBE. In addition, signaling theory also stated that effective internal communication is a positive signal of the organization toward employees. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), employees can serve more appropriately when there is a fit between personal identity and organizational identity (Erkmen, 2018). Furthermore, this study attempts to check out the role of employee empowerment for analyzing the contribution of autonomy of employees in the creation of EBBE. For this purpose, this study attempts to check the role of employee empowerment as a mediator. Third, the findings of this study also have some important managerial implications as well. Fourth, this study serves the literature of EBBE by providing an empirical investigation of the building process of EBBE.

The remainder part of this article is structured as follows: first introduced the key constructs of the theoretical framework and review the literature for hypothesis development. Next, the methodology of the article is presented and the results are discussed. Finally, this article is concluded with a discussion of findings as well as future research directions and limitations of the study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Employee-Based Brand Equity

Organizations are serving their efforts in brand-building activities to compete with the dynamics of the market. Brand equity in this vein is termed as the measurement scale of these brand-building efforts. Brand equity is intensively seen in the literature with the perspective of financial and customer-based brand equity (King and Grace, 2010). However, organizations now realized the importance of the third perspective of brand equity which is known as EBBE. King and Grace (2009) define EBBE as the addition in the value of brand equity bring out due to the efforts placed by employees. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) acknowledged that brand identification and brand knowledge are two significant antecedents of EBBE. Brand identification reflects the extent to which employees feel the similarity between the brand values and the values they own by themselves. In this vein, cognitively and emotionally attached employees could more appropriately understand their responsibilities (Burris et al., 2008). Brand knowledge is the second important antecedent, which is termed as cognitive representation of brand-related information in the minds of employees.

Poulis and Wisker (2016) indicated that there are three important dimensions of EBBE known as "brand endorsement, brand-consistent behaviors, and brand allegiance." In addition, brand endorsement is termed as the extent to which employees show their willingness to say good things about the organization and the brand. Brand-consistent behavior is the second important dimension of EBBE, which could be termed as employees' level of consistency with values and attributes of the brand (King and So, 2015). The more an employee shows brand-consistent behaviors the more he or she could contribute to the building of EBBE. Poulis and Wisker (2016) explain the third important dimension of EBBE and said that brand allegiance is employees' plan to remain part of that particular firm. In addition, brand allegiance is considered a positive characteristic of the employees and is also termed as employee loyalty in the literature of EBBE.

In this competitive era, organizations are now keen to find out more appropriate ways for dealing with the dynamics of the market. The above literature on EBBE illuminated the importance of the third perspective of brand equity. This study is an attempt to serve the literature of EBBE by finding out the building process of EBBE with the help of some positive attributes of employees (e.g., psychological engagement and employee–organization fit) and organizational efforts (e.g., internal communication).

Psychological Engagement

O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) define employee psychological attachment as an emotional bond of association between an organization and employees. Sahu et al. (2017) termed psychological attachment as an affection of a person to the place or other human beings. Furthermore, they argue that psychological attachment with the perspective of employees, organizations and said that it is the degree of employee involvement in the adoption of characteristics and perspectives of the organization. O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) identify "compliance, identification, and internalization" as three important predictors of psychological attachment. Furthermore, they stated that compliance occurs when individuals adopt behaviors and attitudes for the achievement of particular rewards. While identification occurs when individuals give respect to the values of a particular group and feel a sense of pride to be part of that particular group without acceptance of these values (Sahu et al., 2017). Internalization occurs when individuals accept the values of a group or organization because these values have compatibility with one's own beliefs (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986). Furthermore, they argue that the psychological attachment of employees is rooted in their involvement and identification with the values of organizations. The process of identification has a vital role in the development of psychological attachment (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986).

While Burris et al. (2008) stated that the employees who are psychologically attached to their organizations have more strong association with the values and objects of organizations. In addition, the emotional ties of employees with their organizations act as the motivator in the achievement of established goals of organizations (Macsinga et al., 2015). Employees' psychological attachment assists them in playing a positive role in brand management activities. When employees feel an emotional attachment to the organization, their level of performance also increases, which is a positive indicator of EBBE (Poulis and Wisker, 2016). Employee emotional and psychological attachment have a considerable worth in the building process of EBBE (King and Grace, 2010).

Based on the theoretical lens, this study proposed that the psychological attachment of employees has a positive association with the EBBE building process. To measure this relationship, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: Psychological attachment has a positive relationship with EBBE.

Internal Communication

According to Robson and Tourish's (2005) point of view, extensive literature realized internal communication as a possible key to success for the effectiveness of the organization. Bharadwaj (2014) defines internal communication as a collection of formal and informal communication that takes place within an organization at all levels. The author shed further light on the importance of internal communication and said that internal communication is the backbone of a successful business. Internal communication gives rewards to organizations in form of a higher level of employee performance and productivity improvement of firms (Robson and Tourish, 2005; Meng and Berger, 2012). Effective organizational communication systems pooled employees on one platform to achieve the goals and objectives of the organization (Welch and Jackson, 2007). Internal communication is a primary tool to deliver and promote organizational objectives at all levels of business (Bharadwaj, 2014). Furthermore, he stated that for the making of the

internal communication process more effective, organizations are now spending more resources in the planning of clear structures of hierarchy.

Formal communication and informal communication are accounted as two substantial forms of internal communication within the organization (Stevanović and Gmitrović, 2015). Formal communication is considered as a planned activity of management that carries out in exact form and according to the decision of management. A formal type of internal communication is usually conveyed by official meetings or some other formal acts of organizations. However, informal communication is constructed on employees' personal communication network that is not defined by the organization (Stevanović and Gmitrović, 2015). Although, Bharadwaj (2014) points out horizontal and vertical communication as two main aspects of internal communication. Vertical communication occurs either upwardly (from bottom to top) or downwardly (from top to bottom), while horizontal communication occurs between the employees who are serving in similar organizational positions and have the same power of decision-making (Stevanović and Gmitrović, 2015).

An effective organizational communication system creates a platform for employees and helps out in the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. Welch and Jackson (2007) characterized internal communication as an instrument of management by which they can deliver to customers according to their promise. Furthermore, Bharadwaj (2014) opinioned that the carefully planned internal communication strategy of an organization can influence the attitudes and the behavior of employees. Erkmen (2018) noticed that brand management is considerably influenced by the internal communication process of organizations. Additionally, he reported that the information signaled through internal communication to employees plays a vital role in the creation of EBBE.

The above literature illuminates the vital role of internal communication in the enhancement of employee productivity and organizational performance. A higher level of employee output paves the way for the positive creation of EBBE. Based on the literature, this study hypothesizes that:

H2: Internal communication has a positive association with EBBE.

Employee–Organization Fit

Employee–organization fit could be defined as the extent of compatibility to which a person feels comfortable in a particular organization (Sekiguchi, 2004). In other words, it is the relationship of employee and organization on the basis of matching values and attributes between them. Erdogan and Bauer (2005) give arguments about the importance of employee–organization fit and said that similarity between the values of employees and organizations is a considerable factor in the best fit. The possibility increases to remain part of that particular organization if the employees have a good fit with the organization. After collectively admitting the importance of employee–organization fit, scholars are now allocating their energies to finding out the answer of "what are important operationalizations of this construct" (Sekiguchi, 2004).

Operationalizations are measurement strategies of those concepts which cannot be directly quantified (Kristof, 1996). Furthermore, they add to the stream and point out four important operationalizations of employee–organization fit. The first operationalization is concerned with the similarity between employee and organization in terms of fundamental characteristics and values (Sekiguchi, 2004). The second operationalization is related to goal congruence (Kristof, 1996). When employees feel the alignment of goals with their leaders and peers, they are more likely to fit in with organizations. Kristof (1996) further explains the third operationalization of employee–organization fit and said that when the preferences or needs of employees match with the structures and system of organizations, they feel more satisfied at work. The fourth operationalization is reflected as the fit between the personality traits of employees and the climate of organizations (Sekiguchi, 2004). The organizational climate is often characterized as organizational supplies such as compensation plans and hierarchy of communication.

Erdogan and Bauer (2005) point out that organizational needs and wants could be understood in a better way by the employees who have a high level of organizational fit. Furthermore, they stated that this level of understanding smoother the path of the organization to fulfill its agenda more appropriately. The ultimate agenda of organizations is to enhance performance and to improve their employees' productivity (Sekiguchi, 2007). Silverthorne (2004) also add in this vein and said that employee–organization fit boosts the level of employees' productivity and their level of satisfaction. With a higher level of organizational fit, employees feel satisfied and their level of brand association also increases. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) stated that the positive brand association of employees consequently has significant impact on the creation process of EBBE.

On the basis of the above literature, it can be said that employee–organization fit is an important factor for brand management. Effective brand management is a positive indicator for the building of EBBE. On the basis of social identity theory, this study proposed that when employees feel a good fit between personal values and organizational values, they would be more productive and dedicated (Farzaneh et al., 2014). These positive attributes of employees influence EBBE in a positive manner. So, it can be hypothesized that:

H3: Employee–organization fit has a positive relationship with EBBE.

Employee Empowerment

Employee empowerment could be termed as the degree of autonomy and governess to employees permitted by an organization in routine activities (Mohapatra and Mishra, 2018). The organizational intention behind employee empowerment is to realize employees that they are important members of that particular firm (Honold, 1997). Jha (2011) points out "meaning, competence, self-determination and impact" as four considerable dimensions of employee empowerment. The first

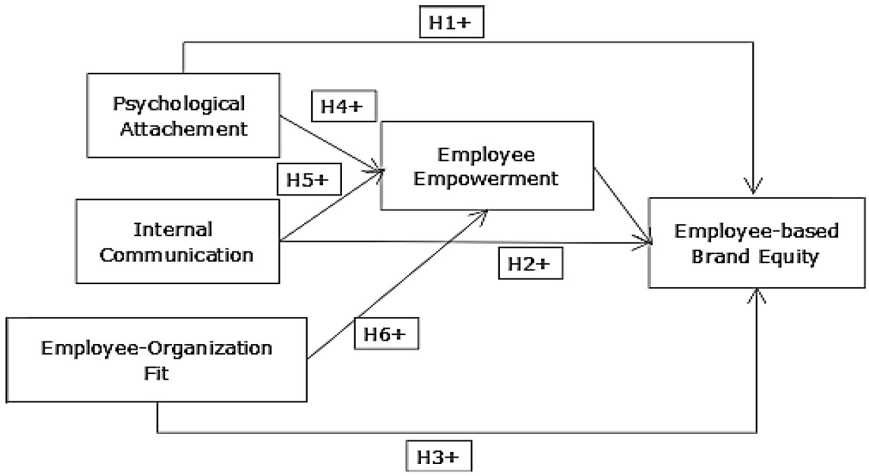

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

dimension meaning refers to the value of a particular goal or purpose which employees determined by themselves (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2013). In other words, the extent to which employees give value or preference to specific objectives. In addition, competence reflects an individual level of proficiency by which he or she has belief in performing tasks with confidence (Avotra et al., 2021). Self-determination is an individual inner level of motivation by which they did some action or task (Jha, 2011). The fourth dimension impact is termed as the degree to which an individual influences the operational activities at work (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2013).

Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2013) illuminated the importance of employee empowerment and stated that it plays a role as a precursor for the improvement of employees' productivity levels. When employees feel empowered in the day to day work activities of the organization, they feel a sense of belonging to the organization (Lashley, 1999). This positive bond creates an emotional and psychological tie between employee and organization. Psychologically engaged employees more energetically participated in the betterment of brand-related activities (Fergnani, 2019). When employees are psychologically engaged with organizations, it is a positive indication for the building of EBBE (King and Grace, 2010).

Empowerment creates a sense of confidence in employees, which, in turn, boosts their level of productivity (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2013; Han et al., 2016). Empowered employees feel independent because they have confidence that organizations trust them (Yingfei et al., 2021). Communication strategies of organizations would be more effective when the internal atmosphere of the organization is pleasant for employees. Welch and Jackson (2007) noticed that effective internal communication planning can assist organizations in achieving expected outcomes in brand management strategies. Erkmen (2018) gives further arguments on the importance of internal communication and stated that it is a strong indicator of EBBE.

Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2013) point out that employee empowerment consequently smoother the way for job involvement and organizational commitment. In addition, Silverthorne (2004) stated that these two positive attributes of employees create an atmosphere where employees feel a sense of fit for the job and for the organization. Additionally, employees contribute in a better way when they feel fit in organizations, and their probability of intention to stay also increases. Employee–organization fit also contributes to increasing the brand performance of the employee as Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) acknowledged that employee fit has a considerable role in the creation of EBBE.

On the basis of the above literature, this study attempts to find out the role of employee empowerment as the mediator in the creation of EBBE with the help of psychological attachment, internal communication, and employee–organization fit. To empirically investigate these relationships, this study hypothesized that:

H4: Employee empowerment mediates the relationship between psychological attachment and EBBE.

H5: Employee empowerment mediates the relationship between internal communication and EBBE.

H6: Employee empowerment mediates the relationship between employee–organization fit and EBBE.

A following framework (see **Figure 1**) has been developed based on the hypothesis and suggested literature.

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants and Procedure

A cross-sectional research design has been adopted in this study and respondents were contacted through the non-probability sampling technique. Keeping in view the ease and access pertaining to the availability of the targeted population, a convenience sampling technique was used (Nawaz et al., 2020;

Huo et al., 2021). Questionnaires were distributed among the employees of manufacturing firms through personal contacts. Formal permission was obtained from the HR department of concerned firms before distributing questionnaires. Respondents were briefed about the study purpose before filling the survey.

This study followed various sample size criteria to obtain a well-represented and suitable sample size. First, the most common and well-established sample size calculation criteria recommended by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) was followed. On the basis of these criteria, a sample size of 384 was set as a benchmark. Second, the general of thumb (5–10 respondents for a scale item) was also kept in consideration and according to these criteria, a sample size of 60 was sufficient. Thus, based on these recommendations, a sample size of 400 was initially proposed and questionnaires were distributed accordingly. Out of these distributed questionnaires, a sum of 340 was received back, after discarding the incomplete responses, the useable responses remained 325 on which statistical operations have been performed.

In order to minimize errors related to common method biasness, we have employed various techniques to address this issue (Nawaz et al., 2019). First, we have used reverse-coded scale items to avoid monotonic responses. Second, we briefed respondents that this study is only for educational purposes and the issue of anonymity will be kept very high as measures to address common method biasness (Shah et al., 2021; Xiaolong et al., 2021). Initially, the demographic characteristics of the respondents were obtained on the basis of age, gender, and experience with current employers. From the perspective of gender, the majority of the participants were male (i.e., 76%), while female participants constitute a portion of 24%. Similarly, 30% of respondents have age between 25 and 30 years, 50% of respondents fall in the age bracket of 31–35 years while the remaining were over the age limit of 35 years (20%). Statistics related to service experience revealed that 25% of the total respondents have 1–3 years of experience in their current organization while the remaining participants hold experience of more than 3 years in their current organization.

Measures

The 5-point Likert scale has been followed in this study to obtain responses from the targeted population. In this regard, the scale range was set from strongly agree to strongly disagree (5-1). The construct of psychological attachment was operationalized on the basis of organizational commitment. For this purpose, a 6-item scale of affective commitment developed by Rhoades et al. (2001) was used. Sample item includes, "I would be happy to work at my organization until I retire." Employee empowerment was operationalized on the basis of the job autonomy scale because this scale elaborates up to what extent a job allows the freedom, and independence of the employees in order to schedule a work or make decisions. In this regard, a 9 items scale developed by Breaugh (1999) is used in this study. A sample item for this scale includes, "I am free to choose the methods to use in carrying out my work." Similarly, satisfaction with internal communication is measured on the basis of a 4 items scale developed by Verčič et al. (2021), the original version of this scale contains 32 items with eight dimensions while keeping in view the theoretical orientation of this study we have used only one dimension, i.e., satisfaction with the internal communication. The statements of this scale were partially modified to match the study context. Sample item in this regard includes, "My immediate superior is well informed about the problems that I may encounter at work." Person–organization fit (employee–organization fit) has been operationalized based on a 9-item scale which is developed by Cable and DeRue (2002). Sample item in this regard includes, "The match is very good between the demands of my job and my personal skills." The dependent variable of this study, i.e., EBBE has been measured on the basis of a 5-item scale, developed by Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010). Sample item includes, "I am aware that everything I say or do can affect the brand image."

RESULTS

This study used a multivariate data analysis tool and, thus, a structural modeling approach [partial least squares (PLS)] (An et al., 2021; Huo et al., 2021) was employed in this study. First, PLS was fitted well in this context because the model was complex and multiple endogenous variables have been used. Second, the PLS approach suites best for non-parametric data. Additionally, theory in the case of EBBE is less developed and, thus, smart-PLS was the best option to use in this regard (Huo et al., 2020).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) has been tested on the basis of assessment of measurement and structural model. The first part of the analysis is related to the assessment of the measurement model in which model fitness related to is reliability and validity is assessed (Hair et al., 2017). In this regard, reliability is assessed on the basis of alpha, rho-A, and composite reliability. All the indicators of reliability have shown a greater level of reliability (refer to **Table 1** under heading reliability and validity). First, alpha values for all the constructs range from 0.742 to 0.916, indicating a well-established standard of alpha values. Similarly, rho-A values for all the study constructs have also been found to fit within a range of 0.773–0.932. While in the case of composite reliability, values are in the range of 0.833–0.933, thus, indicating a satisfactory level of composite reliability. Thus, all the indicators have been found statistically fit and indicate a satisfactory level (values larger than the threshold, i.e., >0.60).

In the case of indicator reliability (refer to **Table 2**), scale items with poor loadings were checked and, thus, items having poor outer loading were discarded/dropped from the analysis. In this regard, EBBE-3 was dropped from the construct EBBE, and EE-9

TABLE 1 | Reliability and validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	rho-A	Composite reliability	AVE
Employee brand based equity	0.749	0.773	0.833	0.555
Employee empowerment	0.916	0.932	0.932	0.635
Employee organization fit	0.881	0.903	0.908	0.589
Internal communication	0.892	0.892	0.933	0.823
Psychological attachment	0.838	0.876	0.887	0.663

TABLE 2 | Outer loadings (convergent validity).

Indicator	Employee brand based equity	Employee empowerment	Employee organization fit	Internal communication	Psychological attachment
EBBE1	0.766				
EBBE2	0.685				
EBBE4	0.774				
EBBE5	0.751				
EE1		0.787			
EE2		0.893			
EE3		0.821			
EE4		0.654			
EE5		0.884			
EE6		0.697			
EE7		0.797			
EE8		0.812			
EOF2			0.779		
EOF3			0.754		
EOF4			0.898		
EOF5			0.607		
EOF6			0.854		
EOF7			0.714		
EOF9			0.730		
IC1				0.884	
IC2				0.937	
IC4				0.900	
PA1					0.777
PA2					0.819
PA3					0.824
PA4					0.837

EBBE, employee brand based equity; EE, employee empowerment; EOF, employee–organization fit; IC, internal communication; PA, psychological attachment.

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity.

Construct	Employee brand based equity	Employee empowerment	Employee organization fit	Internal communication	Psychological attachment
Employee brand based equity	0.745				
Employee empowerment	0.695	0.797			
Employee organization fit	0.543	0.326	0.767		
Internal communication	0.378	0.335	0.247	0.907	
Psychological attachment	0.494	0.323	0.425	0.151	0.815

Square root of AVE of respective construct is reported in diagonal values.

TABLE 4 | Discriminant validity [heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio].

Construct	Employee brand based equity	Employee empowerment	Employee organization fit	Internal communication	Psychological attachment
Employee brand based equity					
Employee empowerment	0.718				
Employee organization fit	0.652	0.343			
Internal communication	0.435	0.365	0.267		
Psychological attachment	0.578	0.352	0.479	0.173	

was dropped from construct employee empowerment owning to low/week outer loading. Similarly, EOF-1 and EOF-8 were dropped from the construct employee organization fit. No item was dropped from the construct psychological attachment while IC-3 was dropped from the construct internal communication (Mela and Kopalle, 2002). Thus, all the items of constructs

TABLE 5 | F^2, R^2, and adjusted R^2.

Construct	Employee brand based equity	Employee empowerment	R^2	R^2 adjusted
Employee brand based equity	–	–	0.638	0.633
Employee empowerment	0.558	–	0.212	0.204
Employee organization fit	0.147	0.030	–	–
Internal communication	0.030	0.081	–	–
Psychological attachment	0.088	0.046	–	–

indicate a sufficient level of indicator reliability. While testing convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) of the constructs was checked and all the constructs have indicated a sufficient level of AVE (at least 50% variation is being explained, refer to **Table 1**). Thus, the AVE of all the study constructs is above the threshold value of 0.50 ranging from 0.552 to 0.823.

While testing the discriminant validity, the most recommended criteria of the Fornell–Larcker criterion [heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio] was followed (Hair et al., 2017). In this regard, the value of the square root of AVE of constructs was checked and it was found/observed that each value in this context was found larger as compared to the correlation values in the respective column and row, thus, indicating a satisfactory level of discriminant validity (refer to **Table 3**; Hair et al., 2011). A square root of AVE of EBBE (0.745) was higher than the respective values in the column, similarly, for employee empowerment (0.797), the square root of AVE was higher than the values in the respective column and row. Similar patterns have been observed for employee–organization fit, psychological attachment, and internal communication [values indicated in diagonal with underline and bold stance (refer to **Table 3**)].

In addition to this discriminant validity has also been assessed through the HTMT ratio (refer to **Table 4**). In this regard, all the values of HTMT ratios have been found within the threshold limit (less than 0.90), thus indicating a satisfactory level in this regard.

Overall model fitness was observed through F^2 and a satisfactory level of effect size has been observed (refer to **Table 5**). Similarly, predictors of this model (employee–organization fit, psychological attachment, and internal communication) indicate 64% of the change in employee brand-based equity and 21% of the change in employee empowerment, respectively. Thus, the predictive accuracy of the model has been found satisfactory (refer to **Figure 2**). In order to assess the structural model, we employ a 5,000 bootstrapped sampling. The reason behind applying this technique was to reduce the risk of non-parametric data (Hair et al., 2017). Predictive relevance Q^2 was found fit as the value of Q^2 was observed greater than zero indicating a good predictive relevance of the model (Geisser, 1975).

HYPOTHESES TESTING

Hypotheses testing has been done on the basis of t and p statistics, while mediation has been tested on the basis of variance accounted for (VAF) (Hair et al., 2011). The first hypothesis (H1) of this study is pertaining to the relationship of psychological attachment and employee brand-based equity (refer to **Table 6**). These findings are in alignment with the findings of the previous researchers (Poulis and Wisker, 2016; Sahu et al., 2017) and it can be termed that psychological attachment creates employee brand-based equity; the reason might be as the psychological attachment indicates the degree of employee involvement with the organization. So employees with a higher level of psychological attachment can build employee brand-based quality (Sahu et al., 2017).

Similarly, the second hypothesis of this study (H2) is about the relationship between internal communication and employee brand-based equity. This relationship has been found significant as it has been observed that 1 U unit change in the internal communication will bring 0.112 U change in the employee brand-based equity. Statistical indicators have supported the argument this hypothesis is supported. Thus, it can be concluded that an effective organizational communication system creates a platform for employees and helps out in the achievement of organizational goals and objectives which can help employees to build employee brand-based equity. Similarly, a carefully planned internal communication strategy of an organization can influence the attitudes as well as the behavior of employees and it can build brand-based equity among employees (Bharadwaj, 2014). Moreover, brand management is considerably influenced by the internal communication process of organizations, thus organizations should focus on internal communication in order to bring positive change in employee brand-based quality (Erkmen, 2018).

The third hypothesis of this study is related to employee organization fit and employee brand-based equity. In this regard, as indicated by t and p statistics, this hypothesis has been found statistically significant and it indicates that if there is a fit between employee and the organization, it will induce employee brand-based equity. In this regard, the stance of Erdogan and Bauer (2005) can support this premise as they posit that organizational needs and wants could be understood in a better way by employees who have a high level of organizational fit. Moreover, higher-level understanding smoother the path of the organization to fulfill its agenda more appropriately (Sekiguchi, 2007). Because with the higher level of organizational fit, employees feel satisfied and their level of brand association also increases and it has a significant impact on the creation process of EBBE (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020).

In the case of mediation analysis, mediation has been tested through the VAF approach and all the three mediation paths have been proved as partial mediation, thus indicating that employee empowerment partially mediates the relationship between all the predictors and outcome variables because the value of VAF is under the range of 20–80% (see **Table 6**). Thus, as per the findings of the previous researchers (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2013), employee empowerment plays a role as a precursor for the improvement of employees' productivity level through employee brand-based equity. The reason is that when employees feel empowered in day to day work activities of the organization, they feel a sense of belonging to the organization (Lashley, 1999). This

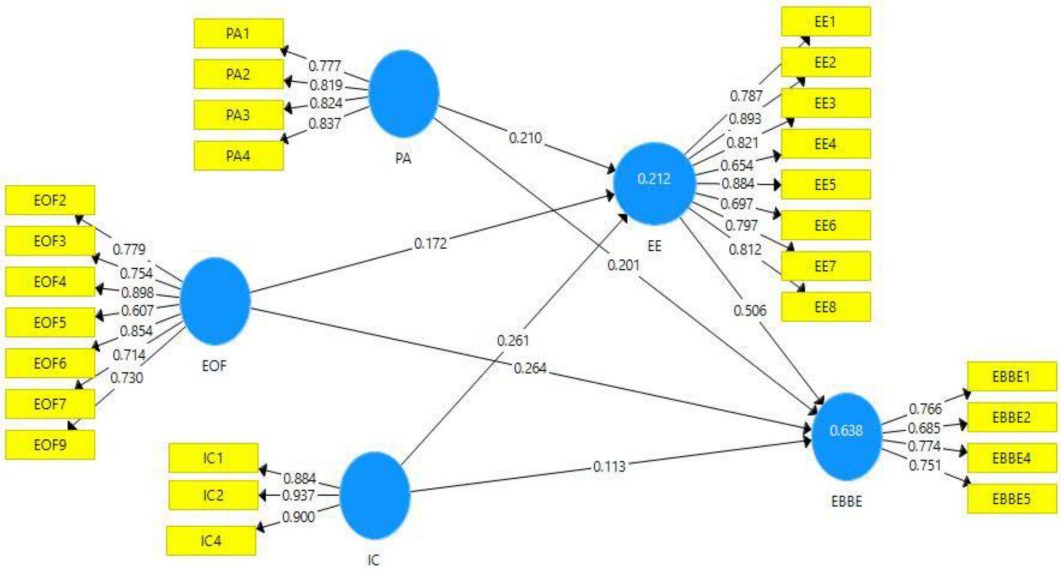

FIGURE 2 | Path estimates and outer loadings.

TABLE 6 | Hypotheses testing.

	Hypotheses	Coefficient (beta)	SD	*t*	*p*	Status
H1	Psychological attachment → employee brand based equity	0.204	0.047	4.254	0.000	Supported
H2	Internal communication → employee brand based equity	0.112	0.035	3.206	0.001	Supported
H3	Employee organization fit → employee brand based equity	0.265	0.039	6.765	0.000	Supported
	Mediation analysis		**Indirect effect**	**Total effect**	**VAF (%)**	**Status**
H4	Psychological attachment → employee empowerment → employee brand based equity		0.106	0.308	34	Supported
H5	Internal communication → employee empowerment → employee brand based equity		0.132	0.245	54	Supported
H6	Employee organization fit → employee empowerment → employee brand based equity		0.087	0.352	25	Supported

positive bond creates an emotional and psychological tie between employee and organization. Psychologically engaged employees more energetically participated in the betterment of brand-related activities. When employees are psychologically engaged with organizations it is a positive indication for the building EBBE (King and Grace, 2008).

Similarly, empowerment creates a sense of confidence in employees which in turn boosts their level of productivity (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2013). Empowered employees feel independent because they have confidence that organizations trust them because satisfaction with the communication strategies of organizations would be more effective when the internal atmosphere of the organization is pleasant for employees and employees feel that they are satisfied with the communication level.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the empirical findings of this study, it can be safely concluded that organizations can follow a path to build brand-based equity among their employees. In this regard, organizations should realize the importance of EBBE and should realize the efforts placed by employees. Because when employees perceive a similarity between brand values and the values they own by themselves they tend to perform better and contribute to the betterment of the firm with more passion (King and Grace, 2008). Similarly, organizations should try to enhance the psychological attachment of the employees with the organization because it increases the employee brand-based equity. Cognitively and emotionally attached employees could more appropriately understand their responsibilities (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020). While talking to internal communication, it can be concluded that satisfaction with internal communication can build a positive attitude in the shape of brand-based quality and employees consider their organization as a priority in their future plan to remain part of that particular firm (Poulis and Wisker, 2016).

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical perspective, this study extended the social identity theory in explaining the mechanism of employee brand-based equity. Moreover, this study contends that how psychological attachment and person–organization fit can enhance positive attitudes at the workplace. Second, this study

has also provided important insights into how employee empowerment contributes toward the creation of EBBE. Moreover, employee empowerment has been tested as the mediating mechanism in this study, which is also a unique contribution of the study. Furthermore, this study documented the role of psychological attachment in predicting EBBE and this thread is also a contribution to the body of knowledge. From the practical point of view, this study elaborates that organizations should focus on creating an alignment between person and organization in order to create EBBE at the workplace. Similarly, the manager should clearly communicate the organizational goals, policies procedures to the employees so that their satisfaction with internal communication will promote EBBE.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Similar to other studies, this study is not free from limitations; the first limitation is its cross-sectional nature, which does not permit drawing a causal inference. Thus, in the future, researchers should consider other research designs in their studies. Although the sample size in this study adheres to the minimum sample size requirement, in the future, a larger sample size should also be considered to get in more detailed and deeper insights. We used only one intervening variable in this study, thus, adding another intervening phenomenon such as job satisfaction, in this case, can bring more interesting results. Similarly, adding a moderating variable such as satisfaction with rewards (intrinsic or extrinsic) might bring interesting outcomes. Adding other predicting variables such as perception of justice might bring more interesting results. Demographic variables such as age and gender can also influence employee perceptions, so in future studies impact of demographic variables can also be checked in promoting employee brand-based equity.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Wuhan University, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

ZL conceived and designed the concept, collected the data, wrote the manuscript, and read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Characterizing Brand Knowledge and Identification as Predictors of Consumer-Based Brand Equity: Mediating Role of Employee-Based Brand Equity

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Branding has been a key factor for the software houses, mainly customers' expectations for a predicted product and real-time experience. The identity and knowledge of brands set a certain set of expectations in the mind of the consumers and the organization's employees. This study mainly investigates the effects of brand identity and brand knowledge on the employee-based brand equity (EBBE) and consumer-based brand equity (CBBE). Further, it examined the mediating role of EBBE among these variables. To complete this empirical study, a quantitative survey was conducted using a 30-item survey method to collect data from 243 respondents from China's software houses. The participants were selected based on purposive sampling. Results show that brand identity and brand knowledge are the main constituents of EBBE, which significantly predicts the CBBE. The study highlights the importance of employees in building overall brand equity. Training and brand promotion activities would help the organizations build a brand identity that positively contributes to the EBBE. Further, brand identity and brand knowledge are needed to improve the human capital, engagement of employees, and their emotional affiliations with the organizations, ultimately making the brand equity of employees stronger.

Keywords: brandequity, employee-based brand equity, consumer-based brand equity, brand identification, brand knowledge

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INTRODUCTION

Branding has become an important aspect for software companies, particularly in terms of consumer expectations for an anticipated product and also real-time experience. The identity and knowledge of brands create a set of expectations in the customer's mind and also workers of the firm. The competition among service brands has intensified. The problem of gaining and maintaining customers is made more difficult by the increasingly fragmented market caused by growing consumer knowledge and experience (Holiday et al., 2021). Brand love has begun to emerge as a fresh marketing trend that is gaining the attention of academia and also industry practitioners. Marketing professionals must maintain a favorable consumer-based brand equity

(CBBE) (Kim J. et al., 2021). Each component of brand equity (physical quality, employee conduct, ideal internal consistency, brand identity, and lifestyle consistency) represents consumers' views and imaginations of the brand, and the picture they build helps the consumer make purchase decisions (Avotra et al., 2021).

In marketing literature, CBBE is said to be a multidimensional concept (brand awareness and brand image). CBBE, or the overall instrumental value that customers give to a specific brand, is important in assessing long-term brand value (Kotsi et al., 2018). Because brand equity is built *via* organic interactions between the different components that constitute a brand. Understanding these relationships within the integrated frameworks of CBBE is critical for measuring branding success and effectively managing the brand. In recent years, the idea of CBBE has gained traction among academics. CBBE and its many characteristics are significant for businesses because of its impact on customer's satisfaction, perceived benefits, and loyalty (Sürücü et al., 2019). Quality perception, brand identification, brand loyalty, and brand image are all ways to develop CBBE (Kotsi et al., 2018).

Customer-based brand equity is viewed as a multidimensional concept in brand management, despite debates about whether the ideas underpinning brand awareness development can be applied directly to brands like hotels, food, and beverage enterprises, where the service aspect is dominating (Rifi and Mostafa, 2021). Because the diverse elements of brand equity are exposed when brands are evaluated in the service industry, adaptations to service-based branding models are required to fulfill service supply's particular features (i.e., non-physical). In their CBBE assessment in the service sector, successful brands are designed to suit physical customer desires and meet their symbolic needs (Wilson et al., 2021). Despite the fact that brand love has emerged as a key component in the consumer–brand relationship, few research studies have been conducted to date on the origins of the love connection between a customer and a brand, and also the potential behavioral implications (e.g., loyalty) (Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021). Brand love, for example, may be influenced by the product or brand's features (e.g., a hedonic product whose primary reward is amusement, joy, or pleasure), and it can also impact brand loyalty.

As a result, brand love may be seen as a catalyst for brand loyalty, which influences customers' behavioral intentions and attitudes and their steadfast allegiance to the brand (Mody and Hanks, 2019). The previous research has shown a meaningful and positive association between brand love and brand loyalty (Kotsi et al., 2018). As a result, brand equity is critical to every institution's development and survival. Many elements of its origins and consequences, on the other hand, remain unexplored and less understood. Despite its widespread in marketing, brand equity's significance in managing service brands has been underestimated (Schmidt and Baumgarth, 2018). Its impacts on national (local) vs. international (foreign) brands are similarly understudied. There has been no earlier investigation of the impacts of brand equity, brand knowledge, and value perception on total brand equity, using brand loyalty as a mediating role (Glaveli, 2021). Brand equity has been developed in marketing as an "intangible asset and a critical value-driver of business success." It may be observed from a variety of viewpoints, which includes those of financial markets, consumers, and workers (Zollo et al., 2020).

Several scholars have attempted to comprehend it through cognitive psychology. Kotsi proposed a third approach, CBBE, which is based on consumers' brand knowledge, especially on the idea that the strength, favorability, and originality of brand awareness are stored in memory. This strategy is based on the distinct marketing benefits of brand knowledge derived through brand awareness (Kotsi et al., 2018). When customers' recollections of one brand are more pleasant, stronger, or distinctive than those of another, CBBE arises. When consumers react more favorably to a company's marketing mix, or any component of it than to a nameless or fictitious version of the same product, the brand shows positive CBBE. Resultantly, brand equity in this context is based on a position compared to a competing brand – whether genuine or simulated. Brand equity is intellectual capital created in the minds of workers *via* strong marketing and human resource activities. EBBE is the value that a brand adds to a company by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of its workers (Lee et al., 2019).

Consumer-based brand equity is becoming more of a concern, but the role of workers becomes more prominent (Christodoulides and Chernatony, 2010). Employees' capacity to execute on client expectations is the foundation for building a strong brand and delivering perceived service excellence (King et al., 2013). As the focus of attention changes more and more to employees, experts argue that studying brand equity from the standpoint of employees, dubbed EBBE, is vital (Gounaris, 2006; Mo et al., 2021). Enhancing EBBE helps organizations recruit competent individuals, and workers' skills and experience provide them a competitive edge. Professionals' identification with enterprises, on the other hand, may add to client satisfaction since they connect directly with consumers or customers (Poulis and Wisker, 2016).

Employee-based brand equity, as defined by King, is "the unequal influence of brand knowledge on an employee's responsiveness to internal brand management." Moreover, how employees become related to brand values remains a key study subject. As a result, the notion of brand equity has grown in prominence as a prerequisite for effective internal brand management. In contrast, two widely accepted approaches on brand equity continue to dominate the literary works: customer-based and financial-based brand equity. That is why King and Grace came up with the idea for the third point of view. The authors advocated EBBE in their groundbreaking study, which emphasizes brand expertise as the cornerstone to inside brand building initiatives (King et al., 2013; Erkmen, 2018). Given the notion's inception and the trend toward that third perspective for brand equity, most research to date has focused on the idea theoretically or conceptually (King and Grace, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010; King et al., 2012). Based on this gap, this research focused on identifying the role of brand knowledge and brand identity on EBBE leading to CBBE.

Employee-based brand equity is a behavioral result of both corporate and also internal branding. Because the corporate brand is the primary concept of both employer branding

and internal branding. Employer branding activities result in good employee behaviors aimed toward the brand image (Nogueira et al., 2020). Consumer-based brand identification refers to a person's sense of belonging to a specific brand (Yoshida et al., 2021). Despite increased awareness, experts contend that there is always more to learn about the significance of customer-based brand identification and also its relationship to consumer's behavior and branding (Li F.et al., 2021). Consumer identification affects individual consumers' behavior, which includes purchasing decisions, brand preference, psychological sense of brand community and brand identification, the satisfaction of customers and a higher likelihood of repurchase, increased customer loyalty, and consumers' decision to purchase premium (Niedermeier et al., 2021). Although previous research has provided valuable insights into the consumer identification process and associated dimensions (Ye et al., 2021), current research tried to fill in significant gaps in a way to explore the relationship between brand identification and CBBE.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Brand knowledge is being used to develop overall brand recognition to the allocation of public consumption patterns, it is also utilized to put workers' brand-related job behaviors in jeopardy. Similarly, EBBE refers to the employees' identification with the brand. In the literature, there are two viewpoints to describe the employer-employee relationship: social exchange-based and brand identification-based relationships. Social exchange theory, which describes workplace relationships *via* the trade of physical resources, has evolved into a social exchange-oriented approach (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Identification-based relationships, on the other hand, are founded here on social identity theory (SIT), which explains employee relationships as a match among personal and corporate identities (Erkmen, 2018). The SIT is the foundation of this research. The SIT was used in a variety of settings, which include the psychology of consumers, information dissemination, and the connection between sports franchises and their supporters (Dimofte et al., 2014; Mckinley et al., 2014; Ambrose and Schnitzlein, 2017).

Social identity theory is a core theory in cognitive science that has been used to explain group psychology, interacting, and social perspectives. It was proposed by Tajfel and Turner (2004). The component of one's self-concept that stems out from social group or groups to which someone belongs, and also the significance and psychological value linked to affiliation to an organization, is referred to as social identity. It is the aspect of self-identity that is mostly generated from belonging to a group (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). People tend to associate and link themselves to different brands as a way of selecting self-identity and a feeling of belonging, according to the SIT. The personal self is founded on the importance and significance that an employee puts on brand identity, according to the theory. As a result, humans form a sense of social identity regarding the social characteristics of the brands to which they can relate (Chan, 2016).

Brand Knowledge, Consumer-Based Brand Equity, and Employee-Based Brand Equity

Due to its significant function as an intellectual capital business asset during the last few decades, brand equity has been one of the primary focuses of interest for managers and marketing experts. There are several definitions of brand equity. According to one of the most frequently recognized definitions, brand equity is defined as the "added value conferred by the brand to the product" (Jeon and Yoo, 2021). Some researchers have come up with their definitions. A combination of brand assets and liabilities associated with a brand, its name, and symbol that increase or decrease the value supplied by a product or service to a company and its consumers are known as brand equity (Firmansyah et al., 2021). Keller defined brand equity as "the differential influence of brand knowledge and consumer reaction to the marketing of the brand," which he defined as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on the consumer-based brand equity of the brand." Brand equity is also described as "the increase in the perceived usefulness and desirability of a product conferred by a brand name" (Keller, 1993).

Employee-based brand equity and also CBBE are comparable in the sense that they are both values derived from the brand's inherent character (Prados-Peña and Del Barrio-García, 2021). EBBE is estimated by the following influence that brand knowledge has on an employee's reaction to his or her work settings and cultures and is characterized from the point of view of customers (Hanaysha and Al-Shaikh, 2021). A brand is any title, mark, symbol, or combination of these used to identify and differentiate a service or product from its rivals (Ali et al., 2021). From the perspective of consumers, brand knowledge is the awareness of the brand personality (Zhang et al., 2022). It comprises a guarantee from the company to its customers and typically depicts what the brand has endured (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2021). It also describes how people felt about the brand. Essentially, brand knowledge is a collection of concepts in the consumer's mind about a certain brand (Kumar and Kaushal, 2021).

Furthermore, because it has actual and totally practical linkages with the psychology of customers, brand knowledge is the valuation of a product in the user's memory (Li S.et al., 2021). In today's business world, a company's brand identity is viewed as an advantage since consumers are drawn to well-known brands that have a strong image in their minds (Islam et al., 2021). Finally, the brand identity symbolizes both basic principles and the business as a whole. Because the identity of a brand typically reveals its personality, it is incredibly significant for a firm (Jamshidi and Rousta, 2021). The brand identity also determines product sales since an appealing brand identity attracts buyers to purchase a product by making the choice process easier (Mehta and Tariq, 2020). Due to the high cost, increased competition, and low demand in today's market, businesses are focusing their efforts on increasing the efficacy of their promotional

expenditures (Krizanova et al., 2019). Because it is vital to have a thorough understanding of brand equity to improve market efficiency (Troiville et al., 2019).

Although vendors establish market knowledge about the brand in the minds of customers, it typically leads to CBBE, which solely validates Keller's CBBE thesis (Pillay and Sibiya, 2021). Because of ephemeral market techniques, brand knowledge is heavily affected in the minds of end customers (Holiday et al., 2021). Brand knowledge is a complex tool since it enables consumers to recall information about a brand effectively and rapidly once they have learned about it (Chesbrough, 2020). Customers' impressions are successfully impacted by brand knowledge since it pushes individuals to choose a brand based on prior knowledge (Yunpeng and Khan, 2021). Overall performance, elements, familiarity, sentiment, reflection, and brand repute are all influenced by brand knowledge (Kim J. et al., 2021). In the framework of brand promotions, the above-mentioned directions entailed establishing contacts with customers (Borges et al., 2021). The primary goal of such applications is to remind end customers about the most popular brands by leveraging their brand knowledge and wants during the purchasing process (Gielens et al., 2021).

Brand knowledge aids businesses in establishing a positive brand image in the eyes of customers (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018). It is also considered a competitive tool since when corporations send information about their brands to distributors, they can be confident that all of the information will be fully understood by the sellers, which gives them a competitive advantage (Górska-Warsewicz et al., 2021). It has a lot to do with all the brand's relationships with customers. Keller's CBBE model is completely compatible with the brand knowledge notion (Zarei et al., 2021). He emphasized that corporate image is a success factor since the organization's strength is primarily dependent on how customers have encountered the brand and how fast they can recall it (Kapoor and Banerjee, 2021). According to this hypothesis, brand awareness improves consumer relationships in general (Chen et al., 2021).

Brand knowledge has such a strong impact on people's thinking, customers may recollect their memories based on it (Zhou et al., 2021). Employee brand internalization guarantees that employees have a thorough understanding of brands and a strong commitment to them, reflecting cognitive and emotive pathways to EBBE (Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021). Employees will encourage pro-brand activities after they acknowledge the organization's aims and values (Binu Raj, 2021). The more a company's ideas and principles of service are internalized, the more consistently and successfully employees will execute as a result (Sonmez Cakir and Adiguzel, 2022). Employees get better brand dedication, expertise, and engagement as a result of brand internalization, which leads to EBBE, and may then achieve or even surpass customers' projected brand value (Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali, 2021). As a result, we proposed these hypotheses.

H_1. Brand knowledge has an association with CBBE

H_2. Brand knowledge has an association with EBBE

Brand Identification, Consumer-Based Brand Equity, and Employee-Based Brand Equity

For years, brands have been critical in establishing long-term customer relationships and ensuring long-term economic success (Rovanto and Bask, 2021). Concerns of consumer–brand identification have become more and more crucial for brand management in this time of high consumer cynicism toward companies, and also the decline in the usefulness of conventional media in marketing brands and the present global economic crisis (Wilson et al., 2021). Consumer–brand identification refers to a person's sense of belonging to a specific brand (Yoshida et al., 2021). Despite increased awareness, experts contend that there is always more to learn about the significance of customer-based brand identification and also its relationship to consumer behavior and branding (Li F.et al., 2021). Consumer identification affects individual consumers' behaviors, which include purchasing decisions, brand preference, psychological sense of brand community and brand identification, the satisfaction of customers, and a higher likelihood of repurchase, increased customer loyalty, and consumers' decision to purchase premium (Niedermeier et al., 2021). Although the previous research has provided valuable insights into the consumer identification process and associated dimensions, future research might fill in significant gaps in this field of study (Ye et al., 2021).

To begin with, much focus has been directed toward concepts related to consumers' brand identification. There has been less effort to empirically document the determinants of consumers' brand identification and to relate the concept of consumer identification with some other variables such as brand commitment and also positive word of mouth (WOM) (Rajaobelina et al., 2021). Second, the branding literature concentrates primarily on the notion of brand loyalty, rather than the concept of brand commitment, which is more commonly found in the relationship of marketing literature (Kumagai and Nagasawa, 2021). Consumers can associate with companies (and their brands) as relevant social categories (Hu et al., 2019). Consumers with stronger brand identification are more likely to engage in pro-brand activities such as supporting the company's goals, trying to protect its public image, supporting its brands, and brand loyalty (Gill-Simmen et al., 2018). Therefore, we suggested these hypotheses.

H_3. Brand identification has an association with EBBE

H_4. Brand identification has an association with CBBE

The Mediating Role of Employee-Based Brand Equity

The entire foundation for understanding CBBE is the idea of brand knowledge (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2019). Similarly, workers' brand knowledge is valued as a foundation for recognizing the value of internal branding initiatives in developing EBBE (Smith et al., 2021). Both ideas (CBBE and EBBE) are also focused on the brand's intrinsic character (Brunetti et al., 2019). EBBE, on the other hand, describes the influence that brand awareness has on an employee's

reactions to the workplace (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2018). Employees may reduce job ambiguity, which is directly tied to their performance, by recognizing brand recognition (Call and Ployhart, 2020). As a result of the disparate and hazy understanding of what the organization's brand implies, employees are likely to communicate confusing brand promises to consumers, thus destroying the organization's brand equity (Glaveli, 2021).

The idea of EBBE has recently been a hot issue in the realm of brand equity literature and theories (Nogueira et al., 2020). The EEBE considers employee brand knowledge to become the cornerstone of generating CBBE, as it will enthuse them to serve consumers and fulfill the organization's goals (Sürücü et al., 2019). Employees' responses to the nature of the workplace are reflected in EBBE, which is highly dependent on the differential effect that brand knowledge has on them (Awan et al., 2017). Employees at the other end play a critical role in bridging and strengthening ties between consumers and firms (Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga et al., 2021). However, due to a lack of focus on EBBE tools and metrics, there is no clear and widely acknowledged foundation for it (Olanipekun et al., 2021).

However, the CBBE concept has been described as a tool in a variety of external branding situations, which include advertising, vacation, sports, and also the fashion sector, whereas just a few studies have looked into the EBBE's antecedents and repercussions (Kotsi et al., 2018). As a result, this study looks at EBBE *via* brand knowledge and brand identification (Siqueira et al., 2021). The previous literature on brand equity has mostly focused on CBBE, which is based on cognitive psychologists (Pina and Dias, 2021). Because when a brand has no significance or content of the product, it is ultimately useless for investors, manufacturers, or consumers. The CBBE concept is the prevailing situation and favored by overwhelming academicians and policymakers in consumer research (Kim E. J. et al., 2021). CBBE refers to brand equity that arises when a customer is familiar with the brand and has some favorable, powerful, and distinctive brand connections in their memory (Rifi and Mostafa, 2021).

Consumer-based brand equity refers to brand awareness that arises whenever a customer is aware of the brand and has some favorable, powerful, and distinctive brand connections in their psyche. Long-term revenues, consumers' propensity to seek out new distribution channels for themselves, the power of enterprises to charge higher prices, and also the efficiency of marketing messages are all advantages of favorable CBBE (Jalalzadeh et al., 2021). CBBE is described in the literature as a decision-making tool that provides managers with a helpful diagnostic of consumers' perceptions of the company (Fernández-Ruano et al., 2022). CBBE is best described as a construct resulting from brand-related connections, with the influence of those linkages concentrated (Cruz-Milán, 2021). We need a deeper knowledge of the composition of brand equity in different cultural settings and different product categories to give advice to management on how to handle their brand equity or investigate the network of its component elements. As a result, we purposed these hypotheses to explain the mediating relationship of brand knowledge, brand identification, and CBBE through EBBE.

> ***H***$_5$. *EBBE mediates the relationship of brand knowledge and CBBE*

> ***H***$_6$. *EBBE mediates the relationship of brand identification and CBBE*

Based on the above hypothesis and literature following framework (see **Figure 1**) has been developed.

METHODOLOGY

This study has applied the quantitative method with a deductive approach to analyze the data. The research philosophy followed here is post-positivism (Avotra et al., 2021), because the relationships of hypotheses have been checked as cause and effect of identified independent variables on other variables. The data are collected through questionnaire surveys from the employees of software houses in China. The population used in this study are the employees of software houses in China. The sample has been selected through the convenience sampling method (Yingfei et al., 2021). A major reason for using convenience sampling is the post-covid situation where people are maintaining social distancing and avoiding direct physical interaction with other people (Serafini et al., 2020). This is a non-probability sampling method in which the sample is selected based on the convenience of the researcher (Xialong et al., 2021). Prior consent had been taken from the potential participants for their availability by

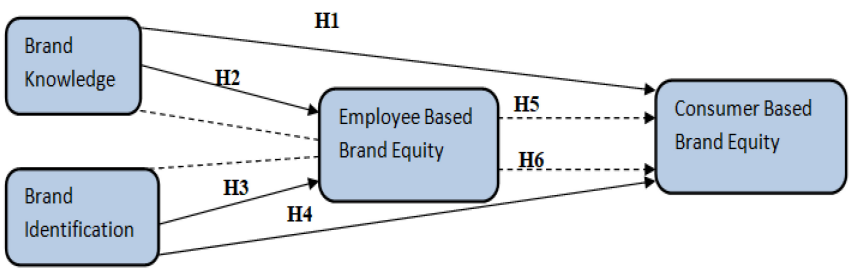

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual model.

contacting the project managers of different software houses located in the mainland of China.

A total of 400 questionnaires had been dropped at the software houses and were explained about the questionnaire to the manager for any misunderstanding or ambiguity. The questionnaire was in the English language and it was ensured that the potential participants properly understand the questionnaire. The anonymity of the respondents had been ensured and the respondents were encouraged to respond independently without being under influence of the organizational authorities. The organizations were visited after 2 weeks to collect the questionnaires. Only 131 questionnaires were filled by them, whereas the rest of 112 questionnaires were collected a week later. The total questionnaires obtained after 3 weeks were 258, whereas the usable questionnaires were 243 making a response rate of 60.75%. The unit of analysis of the study is the employees of the software houses in China. The ethical consideration has been considered while collecting the data by not forcing the participants to return the questionnaires right then.

The ease and comfort of the respondents had been given preference. The data obtained from the surveys had been analyzed using the partial least square structural equation (PLS-SEM) modeling. Through SEM analysis, the data had been analyzed in two steps. The first step checks the validity and reliability of the data obtained, whereas in the second step, the hypotheses developed in the study have been checked to identify whether the data support or does not support them. PLS-SEM analysis is robust with model estimation, especially for theory development. This study has used this statistical tool as it has proposed certain hypothesis forming the basis for the theory.

Common Method Bias

The common method variance, in the study, has been checked with Harman's one-factor test using SPSS 26. Initially, the biases in the responses have been checked with Harman's one-factor test since the responses obtained through convenience sampling can create biasness. This can be considered as under control if the survey method has been ensured for the understanding of the respondents Sharma et al. (2009) which has been incorporated in this study. The one-factor variance obtained from the factor reduction method has been reported as less than 50% Abbas and Sağsan (2019); hence, no statistical indication for the biases in the responses is found. The variance obtained for one factor for this study was 46%. The results can be seen in **Appendix Table A1**.

Statistical Tool

This study has employed the PLS-SEM through Smart-PLS and SPSS software for analyzing the data. This is a statistical tool that analyzes the complex causal effects in the form of path models. It provides less contradiction among the results than regression analysis (Ramli et al., 2018). Quantitative statistical tools have been used to analyze in two stages: preliminary screening and hypothesis testing. First of all, the data were ensured for rationality and the absence of bias through employing Harman's one-factor test. This test was conducted using the factor reduction method for common method bias in SPSS. In the first stage, the measurement model was assessed for the reliability and validity of data. In the second stage of the structural model, outcomes are obtained that are based on the covariance-based structural equation modeling. For hypotheses testing t-statistics, *p*-Values, R-square, and f-square statistics have been employed.

Measurement

In this study, the questionnaires were used as the survey instrument. It consisted of 30 items in total relating to each variable of the study. There were four variables, which include two independent variables, one mediating variable, and one dependent variable. The acceptable value for Cronbach's alpha is reported as 0.7 in the literature (Shah Alam and Mohamed Sayuti, 2011). All these scales were compiled on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 to 5. In the response category, 1 exhibited strongly disagree, 2 exhibited agree, 3 showed a neutral response, 4 exhibited agree, and 5 exhibited strongly disagree.

Brand Knowledge

The scale for the first independent variable of brand knowledge consisted of five items, and it has been adapted from the study of Yoo and Donthu (2001). The sample items included "I can recognize my organization among other competing brands." The Cronbach's alpha reliability obtained is 0.922, which is according to the acceptable range of alpha.

Brand Identity

The other independent variable (brand identity) consisted of eight items that have been adapted from the study of Liu et al. (2020). The sample items included "Our office layout, logo, and clothing represent our brand values." The Cronbach's alpha reliability obtained for brand identity is 0.923.

Employee-Based Brand Equity

The mediating variable of EBBE consists of thirteen items that have been adapted from King and Grace (2010). The sample items included "I am proud to be a part of the organization I work for." The Cronbach's alpha reliability for variable EBBE is 0.947.

Consumer-Based Brand Equity

The CBBE, the dependent variable, consists of four items that were also adapted from the study of Liu et al. (2020). The sample items included "Our brand is better known than our most important competitors." The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the variable EBBE is 0.918.

Demographic Details

The demographic information of the respondents had been collected from the last part of the questionnaire that consisted of four categories, namely, gender, age, education, and nature of the job. The question on gender was categorized into two main streams, men and women. Among the respondents, 53.9% were men and 46.1% were women. Of the age categories, the highest numbers of respondents were between the ages of 21–25 years, followed by the category of 26–30 years, and the

least number of respondents fell under the category of 31 and above. Considering the education factor of the respondents, around 15% of the respondents had Ph.D. or other diplomas or certifications, whereas the rest of the respondents were bachelor's and master's degrees holders, that is, 42% and 43%, respectively. Regarding the nature of the job of the respondents, 37.5% of respondents were software developers, 48.55% were web developers whereas the rest of them were from the human resource department. The results of the demographic profile can be seen in **Table 1**.

TABLE 1 | Demographic analysis.

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	131	53.90%
Female	112	46.09%
Age		
21 to 25	110	45.26%
26 to 30	72	29.62%
31 and above	61	25.10%
Education		
Bachelors	102	41.97%
Masters	105	43.21%
Ph.D. and others	36	14.81%
Nature of Job		
Software Development	91	37.44%
Web Development	118	48.55%
Human Resource	34	14%

N = 243.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Model Measurement

In the first stage, measurement model outcomes are used for checking the validities, reliabilities, average variance extracted (AVE), and factor loads for the initial screening to check whether the data are fit for hypothesis testing or not. For reliability of the data, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliabilities are used whereas for validities, heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratios and Fornell and Larcker criterion have been used. The algorithm obtained for the measurement model from the Smart-PLS software has been given in **Figure 2**.

The results obtained for factor loadings and AVE have been reported in **Table 2** along with reliabilities. According to the study of Jogezai et al. (2021), the minimum values for the factor loadings for the items to be included in the scale have been reported as 0.65 whereas for AVE is 0.5. All the items of the study showed factor loadings well above the cutoff value except for the item EBBE7. The item EBBE7 showed the factor loading for less than the mentioned threshold; therefore, it was excluded

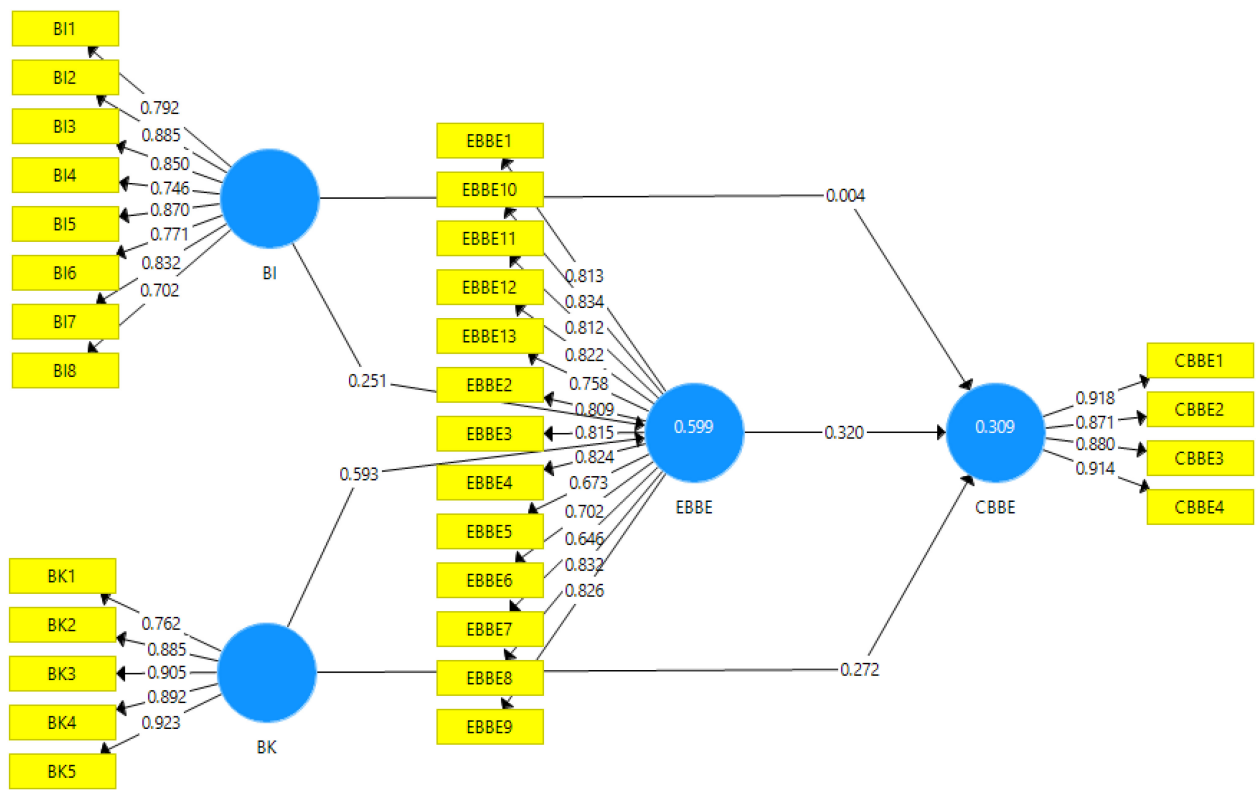

FIGURE 2 | The output of the measurement model.

TABLE 2 | Measurement model.

Variables	Factor Loadings		Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Brand Knowledge	BK1	0.762	**0.922**	**0.942**	**0.766**
	BK2	0.885			
	BK3	0.905			
	BK4	0.892			
	BK5	0.923			
Brand Identification	BI1	0.792	**0.923**	**0.937**	**0.653**
	BI2	0.885			
	BI3	0.850			
	BI4	0.745			
	BI5	0.870			
	BI6	0.771			
	BI7	0.832			
	BI8	0.702			
Consumer-based Brand Equity	CBBE1	0.918	**0.918**	**0.942**	**0.803**
	CBBE2	0.871			
	CBBE3	0.880			
	CBBE4	0.914			
Employee-based Brand Equity	EBBE1	0.813	**0.947**	**0.954**	**0.616**
	EBBE10	0.834			
	EBBE11	0.812			
	EBBE12	0.822			
	EBBE13	0.758			
	EBBE2	0.809			
	EBBE3	0.815			
	EBBE4	0.824			
	EBBE5	0.673			
	EBBE6	0.702			
	EBBE7	0.646			
	EBBE8	0.832			
	EBBE9	0.826			

BI, brand identification; BK, brand knowledge; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; CBBE, consumer-based brand equity. Bold values shows the variable relationship.

from analysis for hypothesis testing. The factor loading of the items included in the study ranged from 0.673 to 0.918. On the other hand, all the values obtained for AVE were well above 0.5, thus showing the validity of the data. The values of AVE in this study ranged from 0.616 to 0.842 and were acceptable. Furthermore, the suitable range for the reliability has been mentioned as 0.7 (Jogezai et al., 2021); the results of the study have shown all the values of Cronbach's alpha reliability and composite reliability above 0.7.

The other measures for validity used in this study are the HTMT ratio and Fornell and Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The acceptability for the validity of the data is considered if the values in HTMT ratios are below 0.85 (Franke and Sarstedt, 2019). In addition, for Fornell and Larcker criterion, each column should have the highest statistics at the top (Henseler et al., 2015). In this study, the values of the HTMT ratio are all significant and are all below 0.85; the highest value in the grid is 0.793 between the variables of brand knowledge and EBBE. These results have been mentioned in **Table 3**. Similarly, regarding the Fornell and Larcker criterion, all the highest values in each column are at the top that shows the discriminant validity of the data. The results for Fornell and Larcker criterion have been presented in **Table 4**.

R-square, also known as the coefficient of determination, indicates the fitness of the proposed model by explaining the variance explained by each endogenous variable in the context of regression analysis. The R-square values obtained for the dependent variables in this study are all good. The variance of the variable EBBE has been 59.9% explained by the independent variables brand identity and brand knowledge. Similarly, the CBBE has been 31% explained by EBBE. Q-square shows the predictive relevance if the model shows predictive relevancy or not (the endogenous variables indicate any predictive relevance). A value of Q-square above zero shows that variables and the model possess predictive relevance. The endogenous variables in this study shows good predictive relevance with CBBE that shows 0.436 and EBBE that shows 0.373 values, thus meeting the criteria for predictive relevance of the model. The outer variance inflation factor values have been mentioned in **Table 5**. The threshold for VIF has been mentioned to be less than 5 (Craney and Surles, 2007). All the values obtained in this study are below this threshold, hence indicating the absence of multicollinearity. The results of VIF have been presented in **Table 6**.

Structural Model Estimation

The analysis obtained from Smart-PLS software gives the output for the results of the structural model. Based on the results obtained from the structural model, the decision for acceptance or rejection is taken considering the t-statistics and *p*-values. The results obtained from the structural model have been reported in **Table 6** for the direct effects. These results show that the first and second hypotheses regarding the impact of brand knowledge on

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (HTMT ratio).

	BI	BK	CBBE	EBBE
BI				
BK	0.665			
CBBE	0.398	0.552		
EBBE	0.651	0.793	0.561	

BI, brand identification; BK, brand knowledge; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; CBBE, consumer-based brand equity.

TABLE 4 | Discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker criteria).

	BI	BK	CBBE	EBBE
BI	**0.808**			
BK	0.618	**0.875**		
CBBE	0.370	0.514	**0.896**	
EBBE	0.618	0.748	0.526	**0.785**

BI, brand identification; BK, brand knowledge; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; CBBE, consumer-based brand equity. Bold values shows the relationship.

TABLE 5 | Outer VIF.

Variables	Item	Outer VIF
Brand Knowledge	BK1	1.701
	BK2	3.303
	BK3	3.603
	BK4	3.938
	BK5	4.759
Brand Identification	BI1	3.006
	BI2	4.028
	BI3	3.723
	BI4	2.175
	BI5	3.695
	BI6	2.454
	BI7	3.183
	BI8	1.690
Consumer-based Brand Equity	CBBE1	3.390
	CBBE2	2.571
	CBBE3	2.731
	CBBE4	3.441
Employee-based Brand Equity	EBBE1	3.945
	EBBE10	3.593
	EBBE11	3.246
	EBBE12	3.528
	EBBE13	3.011
	EBBE2	4.308
	EBBE3	4.562
	EBBE4	3.788
	EBBE5	1.890
	EBBE6	2.523
	EBBE7	2.307
	EBBE8	4.881
	EBBE9	4.737

BI, brand identification; BK, brand knowledge; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; CBBE, consumer-based brand equity.

TABLE 6 | Direct effects.

Paths	H	β	T-Statistic	q-Square	f-square	*p*-Value	Results
BK→CBBE	H_1	0.272	2.928	0.436	0.124	0.004	***Accepted***
BK→EBBE	H_2	0.593	9.864	0.373	0.542	0.000	***Accepted***
BI→EBBE	H_3	0.251	4.125		0.173	0.000	***Accepted***
BI→CBBE	H_4	0.004	0.067		0.000	0.947	*Rejected*

H, hypothesis; O, original sample; M, sample mean; SD, standard deviation; BI, brand identification; BK, brand knowledge; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; CBBE, consumer-based brand equity. Bold values shows the relationship.

CBBE (β = 0.272, t-statistics = 2.92) and EBBE (β = 0.593, t-statistics = 9.86) have been accepted at $p < 0.05$. The third hypothesis showed a significant impact of brand identity on the EBBE (β = 0.251, t-statistic = 4.125, $p < 0.00$), thus accepting H_3 whereas fourth direct effect (H_4) has been rejected, which indicates no significant impact of brand identity on the CBBE.

Table 7 shows the results for the indirect effects of the study. Mediation of the study has been signified with the variance accounted for (VAF) values. According to the study of Pradhan et al. (2020) if the value of VAF obtained less than 0.20 shows no mediation, then values between 0.20 and 0.80 show partial mediation whereas above 0.80 shows full mediation. In this study, the first indirect effect of the study (H_5) is regarding the mediation of EBBE between brand knowledge and CBBE, which has been accepted at $p < 0.05$ (β = 0.190, t-statistics = 3.05) and shows partial mediation (VAF = 41%) as the obtained values lie between 0.20 and 0.80. Similarly, the second mediation of the study has also been accepted, which shows a significant mediating effect of EBBE between the brand identification and CBBE (β = 0.081, t-statistics = 2.45, $p < 0.05$), which shows full mediation, VAF > 0.80.

DISCUSSION

This research has been conducted to evaluate the directional relationship of brand knowledge and brand identification with CBBE. Moreover, the indirect role of EBBE was also evaluated among brand knowledge, brand identification, and CBBE. It is understood that EBBE assists workers in developing a link between their organization's perceived financial cost and advantages and how it will influence them in the future. Whether there is an EBBE among the employees, the organization can profit from it in a variety of ways. This study demonstrated that software houses may effectively establish their CBBE with the support of a strong brand knowledge among the industry and stakeholders by taking use of the consumer-provided facilities. Similarly, good brand knowledge among software engineers inside software businesses may assist in enhancing their EBBE. Internally (EBBE) and externally (CBBE) brand equity is equally vital for the success of any brand in the IT business, which requires a combination of experience, abilities, and implementation.

This study empirically tested the mediating effect of EBBE on CBBE based on two critical variables to understand how brand identification and brand knowledge could contribute toward CBBE. These findings indicated that the first two hypotheses were accepted, which suggests that brand knowledge had a substantial influence on CBBE along with having a significant impact on EBBE. Basically, employees play a critical role in establishing total brand equity. Employees' brand knowledge aids in their comprehension of the brand, which in turn aids in the reinforcement of their brand equity. Similar kinds of results have been reported in the past which suggests that knowledge or information about the brands among employees and consumers has a positive contribution toward creating equity of the brands whether it be employee-based or consumer-based. This is due to the fact that brand knowledge has such a strong impact on people's thinking, customers may recollect their memories based on it (Zhou et al., 2021).

Employee brand internalization guarantees that employees have a thorough understanding of brands and a strong commitment to them, which reflects cognitive and emotive pathways to EBBE (Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021). Employees will encourage pro-brand activities after they acknowledge the organization's aims and values (Binu Raj, 2021). The more a company's ideas and principles of service are internalized, the more consistently and successfully employees will execute as a result (Sonmez Cakir and Adiguzel, 2022). The next two hypotheses that indicate the directional relationship of brand identification with CBBEE and EBBE proved to be a strong determinant of brand equity. The results indicated that the determiner of brand equity, i.e., brand identification had a significant contribution in developing EBBE while it could develop a directional relationship with CBBE. Consumer–brand identification refers to a person's sense of belonging to a specific brand (Yoshida et al., 2021).

The possible reason behind developing such internal organizational equity among employees is the fact that if employees are well equipped with the information about brand and brand imagery or the conception of the brand, then it develops a stronger sense of ownership among themselves. This could lead to a better EBBE, whereas the identification of brands by the consumers did not have a significant impact on CBBE due to the possible reasoning that employees are more concerned with their brands compared to the loyal consumers with brands which

TABLE 7 | Indirect effects.

Paths	H	β	T-Statistic	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	VAF	*p*-Value	Results
BK→EBBE →CBBE	H_5	0.190	3.057	0.189	0.461	41.0%	0.002	***Partial Mediation***
BI→EBBE →CBBE	H_6	0.081	2.457	0.080	0.084	95.2%	0.014	***Full Mediation***

H, hypothesis; O, original sample; M, sample mean; SD, standard deviation; BI, brand identification; BK, brand knowledge; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; CBBE, consumer-based brand equity; VAF, variance accounted for. Bold values shows the relationship.

develops into a non-significant type of interaction between brand identification and CBBE. Some contrasting results are obtained in the previous studies, which indicate that brand identification could have a positive impact on developing CBBE (Yoshida et al., 2021). The indirect effects of EBBE proved to be a helping hand among brand knowledge, brand identification, and CBBE.

As reported in many studies that brand knowledge has an association with EBBE as an internal protocol, it was evident that EBBE could further strengthen the relationship of brand knowledge with CBBE. It is only possible due to the upholding ability of knowledge about the brand by the employees which helps in strengthening the brand equity at the consumer level. Even though the term brand knowledge refers to customers, the idea is also applicable to employees of software houses because brand awareness is the cornerstone for building brand equity. Likewise, employees who are familiar with the brand are more likely to grasp their responsibilities and execute the brand promise (Mangold and Miles, 2007; Erkmen, 2018). The direct effects between brand identification and CBBE were not significant and needed help of a mediator which could develop strong brand equity at the consumer level, so EBBE provided a stronger mediating link between brand identification and CBBE. This is also due to the strength of internal control, which leads to developing CBBE at the consumer level.

Managerial Implications

Employee-based brand equity helps the employees to develop a relationship between the perceived costs and benefits of their organization and how it will affect them in the future. If there exists an EBBE among the employees, the organizations can reap certain benefits from it. (i) First of all, this study provides evidence that software houses can successfully build their CBBE with the help of a strong brand knowledge among the industry and stakeholders by taking advantage of the facilities provided to the consumers. (ii) Similarly, within the software houses, adequate brand knowledge among the software engineers can help strengthen their EBBE providing attractive compensations for their services.

(iii) Moreover, the management of other organizations can use this empirical evidence given by this study that the availability of brand knowledge among the employees and consumers can add value in the intensification of EBBE and CBBE, respectively. (iv) Turnover has been a challenge for the software industry which can affect the EBBE and consequently the CBBE. To cope with this challenge, continuous investment in the training, brand identity, and brand knowledge is needed so to improve the human capital, engagement of employees, and their emotional affiliations, which would ultimately make the brand equity of employees stronger. Training and brand promotion activities would help the organizations in building a brand identity that positively contributes to the EBBE.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes in theory as it has found that EBBE's role as a mediator between the brand knowledge, brand identification, and CBBE conveys the value of the brand from the organization to the final consumers, which leads to CBBE. Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) highlights have been proven empirically in this study. It also highlights the important role that employees play in building overall brand equity for their organizations. The study also contributes theoretically by finding the employees' brand knowledge and understanding of the brands they represent working in the organization help in their understanding of the brand that consequently helps in reinforcing their organizational brand equity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite contributions to the literature, there are few limitations in the study that open new avenues for future research. First of all, the sample size is relatively smaller which is 243, and the results can be checked for generalizability with bigger sample size. Second, the software houses' employees have been taken as the sample in this study; it is highly encouraged to conduct this study in other fields of professions, which considers different cultures for comparison and contrast to this study. Finally, some possible variables are expected to moderate the relationship between EBBE and CBBE (e.g., trust, customer's satisfaction, customer care, brand image, etc.); hence, future studies should consider these variables as the moderators and check their effects on this kind of relationships.

CONCLUSION

In the IT industry which needs a blend of expertise, skills, and execution, both internal (EBBE) and external (CBBE) brand equities are equally important for the success of any organization. This study has investigated the two key variables, that is, brand identity and brand knowledge to understand the mechanism of how these independent variables influence the EBBE and CBBE. The results of the study have indicated that brand identity positively and significantly affects the EBBE; however, it could

not find any effect on the CBBE. Furthermore, brand knowledge has been found as a significant predictor of EBBE and CBBE. In addition, EBBE has been found as a significant mediator among the independent variables of brand identity and CBBE. Among the second relationship of the study between brand knowledge and CBBE, the EBBE has been found to partially mediate the relationship.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies that involve human participants were reviewed and approved by the Liaoning University, China. The patients or participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

ZH conceived, designed the concept, collected the data, wrote the manuscript, and read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 | Total variance explained.

Total Variance Explained						
Factor	**Initial Eigen values**			**Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings**		
	Total	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative%**	**Total**	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative%**
1	14.428	48.094	48.094	13.916	46.385	46.385
2	2.814	9.380	57.474			
3	2.105	7.017	64.491			
4	1.644	5.480	69.971			
5	0.974	3.248	73.219			
6	0.939	3.128	76.348			
7	0.730	2.432	78.780			
8	0.638	2.125	80.905			
9	0.596	1.985	82.891			
10	0.573	1.911	84.802			
11	0.463	1.544	86.346			
12	0.428	1.426	87.772			
13	0.392	1.308	89.080			
14	0.358	1.192	90.273			
15	0.336	1.118	91.391			
16	0.306	1.022	92.413			
17	0.270	0.900	93.313			
18	0.255	0.850	94.162			
19	0.233	0.777	94.939			
20	0.215	0.716	95.656			
21	0.206	0.688	96.344			
22	0.186	0.621	96.965			
23	0.185	0.616	97.580			
24	0.155	0.517	98.097			
25	0.135	0.449	98.546			
26	0.119	0.396	98.942			
27	0.108	0.361	99.303			
28	0.088	0.292	99.595			
29	0.062	0.207	99.803			
30	0.059	0.197	100.000			

N = 243.

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Design Visual Elements and Brand-Based Equity: Mediating Role of Green Concept

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Although benefits of design perception have been documented from the perspective of consumers on a large scale, but the perspective of employees has been ignored. This study aims to investigate the impact of design elements on employee-brand-based equity under the mediating role of the green concept. For this purpose, data are collected from the employees of the manufacturing sector and 346 responses are used for an inferential purpose. These data were collected using the survey research method through the convenience sampling technique. Data has been analyzed through Smart PLS by applying the structural equation modeling technique. After assessing the measurement and structural model, the results obtained indicate that design elements of products in the manufacturing industry can influence the perception of employees and it can foster positive behavior among employees in the shape of employee-brand-based equity. The mediating role of the green concept has also been proved. Limitations and future directions are also discussed.

Keywords: design perception visual, design perception functional, design perception kinesthetic, green concept, employee-brand based equity

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INTRODUCTION

Benefits of design perception have been documented from the perspective of consumers at large, and functional design is studied extensively in the literature, most notably as utilitarian/functional benefits (Petruzzellis, 2010). It refers to the physical attributes of a product, including features, performance, dependability, and durability, that meet a user's sanitary needs and expectations. These intangible elements are concealed from view by users, silently operating in the background to improve the user experience. From a means-end viewpoint, a product's functional benefits should meet higher-order requirements. These intangible elements are concealed from view by users, silently operating in the background to improve the user experience. From a means-end viewpoint, a product's functional benefits are the bare minimum that it must provide before being supplemented with other design aspects to meet higher-order requirements.

While no particular study has investigated that the design perception of products can also create a positive impact on the behavior of the employee. Design is a significant strategic instrument and literature provides support that it may improve product competitiveness but how it can develop positive behaviors in the workplace is still an unexplored area. Perception of visual design is a key factor in experiencing value. The external look of things translates into perceived usefulness *via* subtle clues concerning ease of use, which leads to the creation of attitudes about usability (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005). Furthermore, the visual design conveys a symbolic significance that influences aesthetic judgment, allowing the owner to utilize the object as a means of self-expression. The literature lacks sufficient studies that documented the impact of design perception in shaping

positive behaviors in the workplace. Moreover, how a design perception can influence the green concept is an unexplored area of research, and researchers need to put efforts into identifying and resolving such issues because social and individual drivers have the potency to impact design perception (Hemonnet-Goujot and Valette-Florence, 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, this study is the first to document the impact of the element of design perception on employee-brand based equity (EBBE). This study adds to the literature stream of brand-based equity research and contends that design elements of products in the manufacturing industry can influence the employees' perception. Additionally, this study also advocates that positive evaluation of design perception by the employees can foster positive behavior among employees. So this study can be termed the first study which has examined the relationship between design perception elements and EBBE. Second, this study tested the mediating role of the green concept, which is another contribution of this study. This study tends to advocate that the green concept can increase EBBE. There is a need to investigate non-financial elements which can build brand love (Nguyen and Feng, 2021).

From a practical point of view, this study illustrates that practitioners in the workplace should focus on the green concept and other elements related to sustainability in order to increase EBBE. So it will provide twofold benefits, in case of environmental safety and employee positive behavior at the workplace. Finally, this study has investigated the role of three dimensions of design perception in promoting the green concept and positive behaviors, which can be termed as the contribution of the study.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

The basics of design are perception and are described as a manner of looking at, perceiving, or interpreting a product. Because design necessitates creativity and imagination, perception is crucial to the business. However, perception is the starting point for creativity and imagination. Learning to see is the beginning of creation, as perception is at the heart of all creativity. Designers and marketers should be aware; however, that what one can see is more than what eyes and ears transmit to the brain. It is a result of one's own brain. Perception is not the same as vision. The concept of vision is solid. It keeps an eye on things. The concept of perception is more abstract. Perception progresses from observation to evaluation. However, a person sees what he sees, but he perceives what he sees as a mix of what he sees, his previous experiences, and his unique perspective on a situation (Khongprakob and Kantathanawat, 2021).

According to Huh (2016), visual thinking (VT), which focuses on the use of visual pictures to link ideas, is a useful creative strategy. Intuitive, non-rational, and unsystematic thinking are all characteristics of VT. According to studies, visuals are the most important component in thinking; hence, VT is an individual's primary way of cognition. VT has also been defined as "an active problem-solving process" (Goldschmidt, 1994), with an analytical process of observing, analyzing, and creating visual signals, as well as an interaction between seeing, picturing, and drawing (Huh, 2016).

Design is a significant strategic instrument, as evidenced by a number of studies that show how it may improve product competitiveness (Utterback, 1994). As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that in order to achieve such an advantage, designers must establish a strong brand relationship with users. Perception of visual design is a key factor in experiencing value. The external look of things translates into perceived usefulness *via* subtle clues concerning ease of use, which leads to the creation of attitudes about usability (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005). Furthermore, the visual design conveys a symbolic significance that influences aesthetic judgment, allowing the owner to utilize the object as a means of self-expression.

For most developing countries, entrepreneurship and innovation constitute the bedrock of economic success and long-term viability (Mahmud et al., 2017). This is especially true in Thailand, where the worldwide COVID-19 epidemic has wiped off conventional avenues for productivity and development (such as tourism, auto exports, and electronics manufacturing), produced a highly unpredictable labor market, and has expedited the coming of the future of work (Yingfei et al., 2021). Furthermore, multiple worldwide studies have highlighted the importance of the 21st-century workforce's requirement for critical thinking and creative thinking abilities (Changwong et al., 2018). As a result, solutions and methods must be created to continue to foster the critical thinking abilities of tomorrow's workforce in the "New Normal," where a new teaching and learning process must be researched, developed, and implemented. It must also fit within the cultural and technical frameworks of their different institutions and economies as the New Normal (Moto et al., 2018).

The benefits of the functional design are studied extensively in the literature, most notably as utilitarian/functional benefits (Petruzzellis, 2010). It refers to a product's physical attributes, including features, performance, dependability, and durability, that meet a user's sanitary needs and expectations. These intangible elements are concealed from view by users, silently operating in the background to improve the user experience. From a means–end viewpoint, a product's functional benefits are the bare minimum that it must provide before being supplemented with other design aspects to meet higher-order requirements. These intangible elements are concealed from view by users, silently operating in the background to improve the user experience (Avotra et al., 2021). From a means-end viewpoint, a product's functional benefits are the bare minimum that it must provide before being supplemented with other design aspects to meet higher-order requirements.

Brand Based Equity

The concept of creating an employer brand that exists in a different identity from the external brand yet is consistent, is flawed. Employees do not reside in a bubble that allows them to distinguish between external and internally generated information. The ambition to create "a recognizable and unique employer identity" in the minds of current and future employees must be examined in the context of existing, externally

formed brand knowledge systems (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Esch et al., 2006).

King and Grace (2005) differentiated the notion of brand-based equity from customer-based. For customers to see the value and, as a result, demonstrate good consumption habits, organizations must make the brand meaningful and relevant. They must also make the brand meaningful and relevant for workers to perceive value in order for them to engage in good work-related behaviors, which will result in increased brand equity. From the standpoint of the consumer, the organization aspires to foster long-term purchasing habits. In contrast, the behavior is work-related conduct centered on delivering on the brand promise from the employee's perspective. The reality is that the information source from which these behaviors come is the same, regardless of how they emerge. As a result, EBBE is less concerned with the establishment of a brand identity, which is something that corporations do as a matter of course in their quest for competitive advantage. Rather, EBBE involves the translation of the brand identity in a form that is relevant to the employee in the context of their tasks and responsibilities, which may be described as the differential influence that brand knowledge has on an employee's attitude to their work environment (King and Grace, 2005).

In today's competitive environment, businesses continue to battle to gain a competitive advantage. A shift in thought has occurred toward the new dominant logic that development, survival, and competitive advantage may be accomplished not just by depending on customers, but also by appreciating the value and connection of workers. Therefore, the new problem for marketers is the inherent difficulty of recreating something that is mostly delivered as a result of human capital, namely, workers (Sundaram and Webster, 2000). The capacity to demonstrate significant amounts of brand equity is what distinguishes successful brands. High brand equity, according to Papasolomou and Vrontis (2006), is visible when firms demonstrate qualities and eventually employee perceptions that cause to produce and strengthen the level of connection, affiliation, and loyalty with organizations. Brands, according to de Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2001) and Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010), are a sum of functional and emotional traits. To put it another way, a brand blends practical and emotional values in order to make a promise about the brand experience. As a result, a brand's performance is determined by how successfully it delivers on its promises, which ultimately shapes employee impressions.

King and Grace (2005) describe the notion of EBBE, in particular, taking into account the specific relationship that exists between the individual and the business. Internal brand management's purpose is to influence employee behavior in order to achieve the organization's brand promise, but doing so successfully requires more work on the part of marketers than merely providing employees with brand-related information. While traditional organizational structures assign human resource management (HRM) to the human resources department, there has been a growing focus on employee management having a balanced approach.

Luffarelli et al. (2019) identify the literary aspects of visuals as symmetrical/direct aspects and asymmetrical/indirect aspects. They further endorsed that asymmetrical visuals can be more arousal than symmetrical visuals. This pattern has been attributed to the fact that indirect and unbalanced visuals create more meaning for individuals. Hence, following this stream present research conceptualized the phenomenon with respect to employees' attachment and identification. Hence, it is hypnotized as:

H1: Visual Design perception has positive impact on Brand based equity.

Another aspect of design perception is functional. Employee views of HR procedures have a major role in affecting the success of these policies, according to HRM researchers (Takeuchi et al., 2009; Jiang et al., 2012). Through the perspective of attribution theory, Hewett et al. (2018) provided a synopsis of functional perception studies. HR procedures serve as a means of communication between employers and employees. HR practices send specific messages to employees, whether on purpose or by mistake (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Messages can be included in HR material (the "what") or the implementation of HR policies (the "how"). Employee HR perceptions, according to this logic, encompass the signals workers receive from their employers as a result of watching or experiencing HR procedures. Hence, it is hypnotized as:

H2: Functional Design perception has positive impact on Brand based equity.

Another aspect of design perception is kinesthetic. Design that is kinesthetic in the literature on ergonomics and even human factors, kinesthetic design has been explored repeatedly (Maurya and Agarwal, 2018). These terms allude to product features such as weight, texture, form, and affordances, all of which have a significant impact on the product's ability to be used in a pleasant, safe, straightforward, and intuitive manner. Kinesthetic design, according to Girvin et al. (2000), is an intrinsic representation of effective branding techniques, making it an important product element that impacts overall design and brand perceptions. Hence, it is hypnotized as:

H3: Kinesthetic Design perception has positive impact on Brand based equity.

Green Concept

Human considerations are becoming increasingly important in the creation of green buildings. Occupant behavior, which is based on personal comfort standards, is a driving component of energy usage in office buildings (Nawaz et al., 2022). Overtime is a typical occurrence in modern society, and it poses a severe threat to energy conservation and occupant well-being (Xue et al., 2016). Because employees are the most expensive part of any business, organizations have been compelled to improve employee health, well-being, and productivity by enhancing workplace environments such as daylighting, natural ventilation, natural views, open space, places of respite, and other conveniences. The objective is to optimize health, well-being, and productivity results to be consistent with, if not improved by, the initiatives to reduce

energy and resource use. Previous research has shown the links between the office environment and the health and well-being of its occupants (Lee and Maheswaran, 2011). The local surroundings and green elements of open space adjacent to the workplace influence the inhabitants' usage habits and health perceptions, according to environmental psychology theories (Chang and Chen, 2005). The intermediating causal relationships between workers' subjective perception design in the workplace and brand equity, on the other hand, are rarely studied.

The term "HR strength" is used frequently in the literature. Employees' collective awareness of HR procedures is well linked to management's aims, thanks to a solid HR system (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). The situational strength study is where the concept of HR strength gets its start (Katou et al., 2014). Employees in a strong position have a shared awareness of the organization's rules, practices, processes, and goals, as well as the anticipated and rewarded actions. These flexible, user-friendly policies, according to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), are green policies. Employees under a poor circumstance, on the other hand, face a great deal of ambiguity about what is expected of them in their work life, resulting in a wide range of workplace attitudes and actions (Ostrom et al., 2015). According to researchers, a strong scenario impacts employee attitudes and actions, hence, aspects of an HR system that allow for the establishment of a strong situation are crucial.

Employee views of HR processes may be explained more fully using signaling theory. Signaling theory is concerned with strategies to use signaling activities to lessen information asymmetry between signalers, or information senders, and information receivers (Bednall et al., 2019). HR procedures are viewed as signals from management to employees in this approach. HR perception studies can be influenced by ideas on signals, signal senders, and signal receivers. Based on these notions following hypotheses of mediation relations are derived and a conceptual framework is formed based on prior literature (**Figure 1**).

H4: Green Concept mediates the relationship between Visual Design perception and Brand based equity.

H5: Green Concept mediates the relationship between Functional Design perception and Brand based equity.

H6: Green Concept mediates the relationship between Kinesthetic Design perception and Brand based equity.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study has followed a cross-sectional research design in this study to approach the study participants, and they were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling technique. Cross-sectional research design is commonly used in survey-based research. In this regard employees working in different manufacturing firms were approached where the issue of sustainability is kept under consideration by the firms such as the construction industry and mobile phone manufacturing firms. Before administrating questionnaires to the participants, prior approval from their administrator was obtained. Moreover, informed consent was obtained from the participants before asking them to complete the survey items. In addition to this, it was ensured to them that these data are being collected for academic purposes and the issue of anonymity will be kept under consideration.

With the approval from both, the participants and their administration, the survey was started and participants were offered a movie ticket in return for their response so that their motivation of the participants could be boosted. Different benchmarks were scrutinized to select a suitable number of respondents for data collection, but this study followed the criteria recommended by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and a sample size of 384 was considered sufficient in this regard. This criterion has been used by several researchers in the past (Bashir et al., 2019, 2020; Wu et al., 2022).

Based on this criterion a sum of distributed to 400 questionnaires through personal contacts, out of which 360 were received back. After discarding the incomplete and partially filled responses the useable responses were 346. Returned questionnaires were checked for missing values and responses where missing values were higher than 5% were discarded. This sample size indicates an adequate level because this study employed Smart PLS software which handles the small sample size very comfortably (Xiaolong et al., 2021; Dar et al., 2022).

Due to the cross-sectional nature, the issue of common method biasness was likely to shatter the results, this issue was managed by following various measures. Firstly this study used reverse coded questions in the survey items to reduce the monotonic response from the participants. Secondly, it was opted to place the questions related to the variables at a different place, thus restricting the participants to generate an autocorrelation based on perception. Thirdly, we used a single-factor test to check the variance being explained by the factors, and not a single variable was explaining more than the 50% variance, confirming that there is no issue of common method biases (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Malhotra et al., 2006).

Demographic Characteristics

Initially, the respondents were asked to rate their demographic features based on qualification, gender, experience in the current organization, and total experience. Educational level indicates that most of the participants have 16 years of education with 70% proportion in the participants while both male and female participants share almost equal portion such as [i.e., 52% (male) and 48% (female)]. A total of 50% of the employees have more than 5 years experience in their current employer while the remaining have less than 5 years experience with their current employer. While in the case of the total length of experience/service all of the respondents have more than 5 years of experience.

Instrument Development

Responses were obtained on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates strongly disagree and 5 indicates

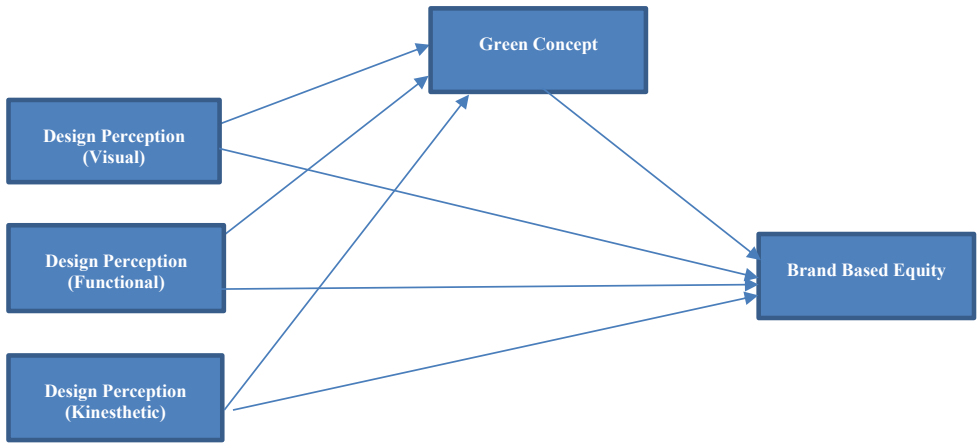

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

strongly agree. Three dimensions of design perception, namely, visual, functional, and kinesthetic have been measured through the scale items developed by Mishra et al. (2015) and recently used by Meng and Bari (2019). For this purpose total of 15 items have been used such as "the styling of manufactured products is elegant." This scale was partially amended with the context of the industry and participants and the wording of the statements was modified keeping in view the study background. However, the original meanings of the items that remained were not changed. The scale items indicate a good level of Cronbach's alpha which was more than 0.60. Similarly, the second dimension of the design perception, i.e., functional is measured through seven items scale developed by Mishra et al. (2015) and recently used by Meng and Bari (2019). Sample items include "our 3D printed products offers the right number of basic features that I need." Cronbach's alpha value was higher than 0.60 indicating a satisfactory level. This scale was partially amended with the context of the industry and participants and the wording of the statements was modified keeping in view the study background. However, the original meanings of the items that remained were not changed. Similarly, the third dimension of design perception (kinesthetic) was measured through three items scale developed by Mishra et al. (2015) and recently used by Meng and Bari (2019). Sample item includes, "the size of products makes it easy to carry and move around." Cronbach's alpha value in this regard was more than 0.60 indicating a satisfactory level. This scale was partially amended with the context of the industry and participants and the wording of the statements was modified keeping in view the study background. However, the original meanings of the items remained were not changed.

The mediating variable in this study, i.e., green concept is measured through six items scale developed by Rezai et al. (2013). A sample item for this scale includes, "It makes me feel good to go green because it benefits the society." Cronbach's alpha value in this regard was more than 0.60 indicating a satisfactory level. The outcome [dependent variable in this study is measured through five items scale, developed by Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010)] sample item includes, "I am aware that everything I say or do can affect the brand image."

RESULTS

Assessment of Measurement and Structural Model

This study used a multivariate data analysis tool in order to test the hypotheses through structural equation modeling (SEM). For this purpose, the most commonly used partial least square (PLS) approach through Smart PLS was used. This software deals very well with the complex nature of research frameworks/models (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, Smart PLS does not consider the distributional assumptions with regard to normality and the issue of non-normal data is dealt with comfortably. Moreover, a small sample size can also be tested through Smart PLS very comfortably and even a sample size of 49 observations can be tested easily. Assessment of SEM is based on two approaches/methods, the first one is based on a measurement model while the second one is based on a structural model (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 1 depicts the reliability and validity of the study constructs with regard to the measurement of the model. Both reliability and validity indicators have been found fit in this study, the first measure in this regard related to reliability is Cronbach's alpha. The minimum acceptable value for this indicator of reliability is 0.60, while in this study, the alpha values have been found statistically fit, indicating a satisfactory level. The first dimension of design perception, i.e., design perception visual indicates an alpha value of 0.849, while, the alpha value of design perception functional is 0.896 and for design perception, the Kinesthetic alpha value is 0.847. The alpha value for the green concept is 0.882 and for brand-based equity it has been observed as 0.759. Similarly, another measure of reliability, i.e., rho-A has been found fit and all the values were within the acceptable range, 0.791–0.895. While the third indicator of reliability is also found to fit and values related to composite reliability were also

TABLE 1 | Reliability and convergent validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Item	Outer loadings	VIF	Alpha	rho-A	Composite reliability	AVE
DPF	DPF1	0.804	4.395	0.849	0.860	0.888	0.571
	DPF2	0.766	1.811				
	DPF4	0.646	1.407				
	DPF5	0.829	2.920				
	DPF6	0.755	3.922				
	DPF7	0.722	2.645				
DPK	DPK1	0.891	2.402	0.896	0.897	0.935	0.829
	DPK2	0.940	3.918				
	DPK4	0.899	2.919				
	DPV1	0.796	4.385				
DPV	DPV3	0.833	4.766	0.847	0.877	0.894	0.677
	DPV4	0.826	1.934				
	DPV5	0.837	1.801				
EBBE	EBBE1	0.653	1.262	0.759	0.791	0.845	0.579
	EBBE2	0.755	2.118				
	EBBE3	0.812	1.449				
	EBBE5	0.813	2.348				
GC	GC1	0.787	1.935	0.882	0.895	0.911	0.634
	GC2	0.885	3.710				
	GC3	0.801	2.075				
	GC4	0.690	1.529				
	GC5	0.880	3.451				
	GC6	0.712	1.697				

DPF, design perception functional; DP, design perception kinesthetic; DPV, design perception visual; EBBE, employee-brand based equity; GC, green concept.

within an acceptable range (more than 0.60), thus indicating a satisfactory level of reliability. While talking about convergent validity, we have used two measures to assess convergent validity, the first is average variance extracted (AVE) and the other is outer loadings. It has been found that the AVE of the respective constructs is greater than the threshold limits of the acceptable range ($\geq$0.50). All the constructs indicated that their AVE values were greater than the threshold value ($\geq$0.50) (Mela and Kopalle, 2002). AVE values range from 0.571 to 0.829.

While outer loadings were assessed in the second instance to assess the convergent validity (**Figure 2** and **Table 1** illustrate convergent validity). All the scale items were observed for outer loadings, and it was observed that all the scale items show a good level related to the outer loadings. Items with poor outer loadings were dropped from the analysis. In this regard, one item from the design perception functional was dropped owing to poor or weak outer loading (DPF-3), while all other items have an acceptable level of outer loadings (>0.708). Similarly, one item (DPV-2) from the dimension design perception visual has been dropped due to a weak outer loading value. No item has been dropped from design perception kinesthetic. While in the case of mediating variable, all the items indicate sufficient outer loading level, and no item was dropped. However, one item from the outcome variable (EBBE-4) was dropped due to poor outer loadings. Despite one item EBBE-1 having a lower value (less than threshold) it was retained because the AVE of this construct was within the acceptable range. Similarly, one item from the construct green concept (GC-4) was retained due to poor outer loadings, however, the AVE of the respective construct was higher than 50%.

Another dimension of validity, discriminant validity is assessed through two well-established criteria, i.e., Fornerl-Larker (1981) and HTMT ratios (Hair et al., 2017). **Table 2** (Fornell-Larcker criteria) and **Table 3** (HTMT ratios) in this regard illustrate discriminant value. The first criteria in this regard indicate that the square root of the AVE of variables is higher than the correlations among them (Hair et al., 2011; Bashir et al., 2020) as indicated by values in bold and underlined values reported in diagonals.

HTMT is used as a second measure to assess the discriminant validity. Two criteria were observed in this regard (liberal and conservative). Both the criteria were met as the values of HTMT ratios in all columns are less than 0.90 and 0.85, describing that both liberal and conservative criteria are met. Liberal criteria HTMT ratio indicates that the value of HTMT should not be higher than 0.90 while conservative criteria indicate that the value of HTMT should not be higher than 0.85. **Table 4** illustrates the discriminant validity through HTMT ratios.

Model fitness was assessed through the coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect size (f^2). **Table 4** illustrates the quality criteria based on the coefficient of determination. Here, it has been observed that predictors along with the green concept are explaining 45% variation in the EBBE, indicating a good level of variance. While three dimensions of design perception were explaining 21% of perception in the green concept (mediating variable) thus predicting a good and reasonable model fitness (Bashir et al., 2020), and a satisfactory level (Hair et al., 2017). In this study, we have also assessed the predictive relevance of the model through Q^2 (Geisser, 1975), and it has been observed that the value of Q^2 was higher than zero, which indicates a good model predictive relevance.

Hypotheses Testing

The last stage of assessment of the structural model is related to path estimates among study constructs and hypotheses testing. **Table 4** in this regard illustrates direct, indirect, and total path estimates, while **Table 5** illustrates hypotheses testing. The first hypothesis of this study is related to visual design perception and brand based equity. Statistical data indicates that the impact of visual design perception is positive on EBBE (b = 0.214, t = 4.636, and p = 0.000). The coefficient value indicates that positive perception regarding visual design triggers employees to develop brand-based equity (H1 supported). These findings are in connection with the previous studies as noted by King and Grace (2005) that EBBE, in particular, takes into account the specific relationship that exists between the individual and the business. Internal brand management's purpose is to influence employee behavior in order to achieve the organization's brand promise, while traditional organizational structures assign HRM to the human resources department, there has been a growing focus on employee management having a balanced approach.

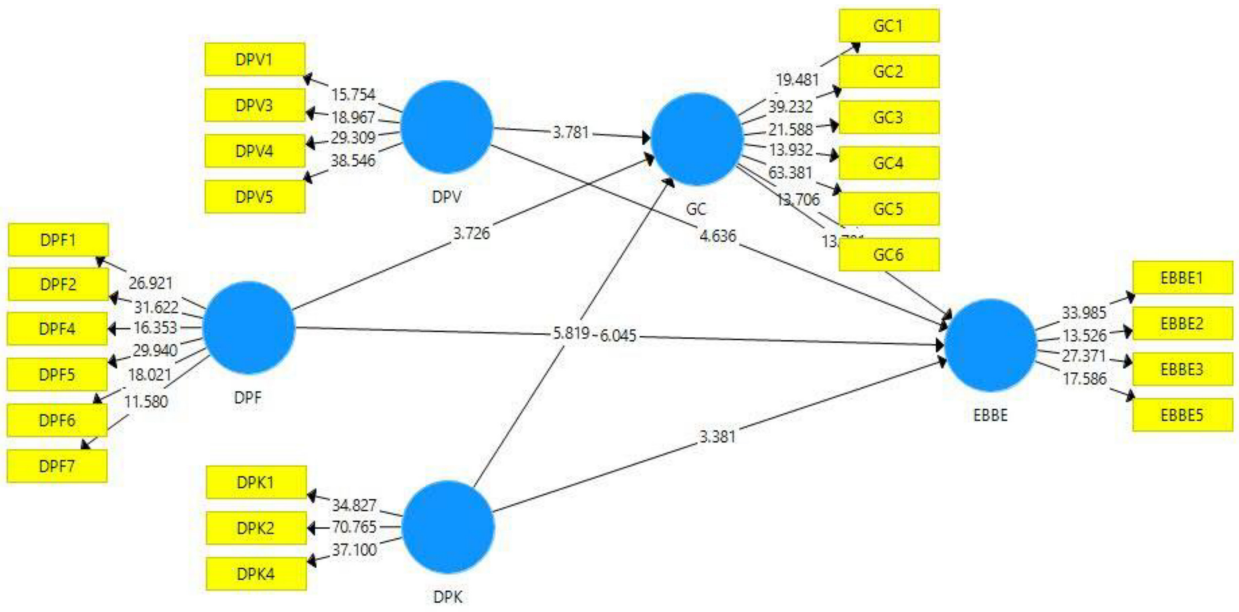

FIGURE 2 | Path estimates and outer loadings.

Luffarelli et al. (2019) identify the literary aspects of visuals as symmetrical/direct aspects and asymmetrical/indirect aspects. They further endorsed that asymmetrical visuals can be more arousal than symmetrical visuals. This pattern has been attributed to the fact that indirect and unbalanced visuals create more meaning for individuals.

The second hypothesis of this study is related to the impact of functional design perception and brand-based equity. Results indicate that the impact of functional design perception is positive on EBBE (b = 0.239, t = 6.045, and p = 0.000). The coefficient value indicates that positive perception regarding functional elements triggers employees to develop brand-based equity (H2 supported). These findings are in connection with the previous studies done by HRM researchers (Takeuchi et al., 2009; Jiang et al., 2012). Through the perspective of attribution theory, Hewett et al. (2018) provided a synopsis of functional perception studies. HR procedures serve as a means of communication between employers and employees. HR practices send specific

TABLE 2 | Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker-1981 criteria).

Construct	DPF	DPK	DPV	EBBE	GC
DPF	*0.756*				
DPK	0.258	*0.910*			
DPV	0.431	0.191	*0.823*		
EBBE	0.547	0.385	0.535	*0.761*	
GC	0.323	0.361	0.328	0.597	*0.796*

DPF, design perception functional; DP, design perception kinesthetic; DPV, design perception visual; EBBE, employee-brand based equity; GC, green concept.

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Construct	DPF	DPK	DPV	EBBE	GC
DPF	–	–	–	–	–
DPK	0.284	–	–	–	–
DPV	0.494	0.217	–	–	–
EBBE	0.646	0.468	0.596	–	–
GC	0.358	0.401	0.362	0.740	–

DPF, design perception functional; DP, design perception kinesthetic; DPV, design perception visual; EBBE, employee-brand based equity; GC, green concept.

TABLE 4 | Direct, indirect, and total path estimates.

	Beta	SD	t	p
Direct path				
DPF → EBBE	0.239	0.039	6.045	0.000
DPF → GC	0.166	0.045	3.726	0.000
DPK → EBBE	0.116	0.034	3.381	0.001
DPK → GC	0.283	0.049	5.819	0.000
DPV → EBBE	0.214	0.046	4.636	0.000
DPV → GC	0.201	0.053	3.781	0.000
GC → EBBE	0.515	0.038	13.701	0.000
Indirect path				
DPF → GC → EBBE	0.086	0.023	3.653	0.000
DPK → GC → EBBE	0.146	0.026	5.560	0.000
DPV → GC → EBBE	0.103	0.028	3.674	0.000
Total path				
DPF → EBBE	0.324	0.042	7.766	0.000
DPK → EBBE	0.262	0.038	6.922	0.000
DPV → EBBE	0.317	0.053	5.969	0.000

DPF, design perception functional; DP, design perception kinesthetic; DPV, design perception visual; EBBE, employee-brand based equity; GC, green concept.

TABLE 5 | Hypotheses testing.

		Coefficient (beta)	SD	*t*	*p*	Status
Hypotheses						
H1	DPV → EBBE	0.214	0.046	4.636	0.000	Supported
H2	DPF → EBBE	0.239	0.039	6.045	0.000	Supported
H3	DPK → EBBE	0.116	0.034	3.381	0.001	Supported
Mediation hypotheses						
H4	DPV → GC → EBBE	0.103	0.028	3.674	0.000	Supported
H5	DPF → GC → EBBE	0.086	0.023	3.653	0.000	Supported
H6	DPK → GC → EBBE	0.146	0.030	5.56	0.000	Supported

DPF, design perception functional; DP, design perception kinesthetic; DPV, design perception visual; EBBE, employee-brand based equity; GC, green concept.

messages to employees, whether on purpose or by mistake (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004).

The third hypothesis of this study is related to kinesthetic design perception and brand-based equity. Statistical data indicates that the impact of kinesthetic design perception is positive on EBBE (b = 0.116, t = 3.381, and p = 0.000). The coefficient value indicates that positive perception regarding the kinesthetic element of design perception triggers employees to develop brand-based equity (H3 supported). These findings indicate that design kinesthetic in the literature kinesthetic design has been explored repeatedly (Maurya and Agarwal, 2018). These terms allude to product features such as weight, texture, form, and affordances, and indicate that it has a pleasant, safe, straightforward, and intuitive impact on employees' perception. Kinesthetic design, according to Girvin et al. (2000), is an intrinsic representation of effective branding techniques, making it an important product element that impacts overall design and brand perceptions.

Similarly, the indirect effect (H4) for the path DPV → GC → EBBE, has been found statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) (H4 supported). For other two mediating paths, DPF → GC → EBBE (H5) and DPK → GC → EBBES (H6) have been found statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) (H5 and H6 supported). All these mediating paths are tested on the basis of indirect effect and their significance level. These findings support the argument green concept can trigger more positive emotions and employee can develop brand-based equity. Human considerations are becoming increasingly important in the creation of green buildings. Occupant behavior, which is based on personal comfort standards, is a driving component of energy usage in office buildings. Overtime is a typical occurrence in modern society, and it poses a severe threat to energy conservation and occupant well-being (Xue et al., 2016).

Owning to the reason that employees are very crucial for business, organizations have been compelled to improve employee health, well-being, and productivity by enhancing workplace environments such as daylighting, natural ventilation, natural views, open space, places of respite, and other conveniences. The objective to optimize health, well-being, and productivity results are consistent with, if not improved by, initiatives to reduce energy and resource use. Previous research has shown the links between the office environment and the health and well-being of its occupants (Lee and Maheswaran, 2011).

The term "HR strength" is used frequently in the literature. Employees' collective awareness of HR procedures is well linked to management's aims, thanks to a solid HR system (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). The situational strength study is where the concept of HR strength gets its start (Katou et al., 2014). Employees in a strong position have a shared awareness of the organization's rules, practices, processes, and goals, as well as the anticipated and rewarded actions. These flexible, user-friendly policies, according to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), are green policies. Employees in poor circumstances, on the other hand, face a great deal of ambiguity about what is expected of them in their work life, resulting in a wide range of workplace attitudes and actions (Ostrom et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

On the basis of empirical evidence, it can be safely concluded that the impact of visual design perception is positive on EBBE and a positive evaluation of visual design motivates employees to develop brand based equity. EBBE, in particular, takes into account the specific relationship that exists between the individual and the business. Internal brand management can influence employee behavior in order to achieve the organization's brand promise. This pattern has been attributed to the fact that indirect and unbalanced visuals create more meaning for individuals. Moreover, functional design perception is positive on EBBE and functional elements trigger employees to develop brand-based equity. Moreover, kinesthetic design perception is positive on EBBE, and design kinesthetic depicts that weight, texture, form, and affordances, have a pleasant, safe, straightforward, and intuitive impact on employees' perception.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical perspective, this study is the first to document the impact of the element of design perception on EBBE. This study adds to the present stream of the brand-based equity research and contends that design elements of products in the manufacturing industry can influence the employees' perception and it can foster positive behavior among employees. So this study can be termed the first study which has examined the relationship between design perception elements and EBBE. Secondly, this study tested the mediating role of the green concept, which is another contribution of this study. This study tends to advocate that the green concept can increase EBBE. From a practical point of view, this study illustrates that practitioners in the workplace should focus on the green concept and other elements related to sustainability in order to increase EBBE. So it will provide twofold benefits, in case of environmental safety and employee positive behavior.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has also some potential limitations; first, it is a cross-sectional study and does not permit drawing a causal inference in this regard. Second, data are collected from only manufacturing firms which can also be expanded in future studies. Moreover, this study only anticipated the green concept as a mediating variable, while in future studies other potential mediating and moderating mechanisms can also be tested. In this regard, green behavior, and job satisfaction can be tested in future studies. In addition to this safety, eldership can also be tested as a moderating phenomenon in the future. This study tested mediation through the indirect effects, and no specification i.e. either partial or full mediation was observed, thus, in the future study, the author can also inspect the nature of mediation too. Moreover, collecting a larger sample can provide important and deeper insights in this regard. In the future researchers can opt to investigate and explore the impact of design perception in shaping brand love in luxury products designs/manufacturers.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

YL conceived and designed the concept and wrote the manuscript. The author read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Psychological and Behavioral Outcomes From the Perspective of Moral Culture: A Study of College Students

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Although the issue of moral identity and morality is under investigation for the last many years, there is still a need to investigate its role in how it promotes behavior. This study tends to extend this string of literature and attempted to investigate the mediating role of moral reasoning among the elements of moral culture, prosocial behavior, and psychological wellbeing. For this purpose, college students were selected as participants in this study. For this purpose, a two-wave strategy was followed to collect data. In the first wave of questionnaire distribution, 600 college students were contacted to complete the response. A hidden secret code was allotted to each questionnaire to trace the respondent for the second wave. From the distributed 600 questionnaires, 507 questionnaires were received back. At this stage, demographic characteristics and questions related to both the independent variables were asked from the respondents. While in the next wave, 448 questionnaires were received back from the redistributed questionnaires in the second wave. After discarding the incomplete and partially filled questionnaires (17 questionnaires) there were left 431 useable responses. These responses were used to run the tests through structural equation modeling (SEM) through assessment of measurement and structural model. Results indicate that symbolization promotes positive changes in the psychological wellbeing of the students and prosocial behavior of the college students. Moreover, internalization can promote psychological wellbeing. However, the impact of internalization on the prosocial behavior of college students has not been found statistically significant. Moreover, it can be safely concluded that moral reasoning has the potency to mediate the relationship of symbolization and psychological wellbeing as well as prosocial behavior. Moral reasoning also mediates the relationship between internalization and psychological well-being and prosocial behavior.

Keywords: symbolization, internalization, moral reasoning, prosocial behavior, psychological wellbeing, moral identity

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INTRODUCTION

Recently there is a piece of increasing evidence that the moral identity plays a vital role in the moral functioning by affecting how people might interpret and respond to different situations that involve moral choice and judgment (Cui et al., 2021). The obligation one feels toward engaging in moral actions is related directly to his moral identity *via* his willingness to maintain his self-consistency (Blasi, 1994; Di Blasio et al., 2019). Aquino and Reed (2002) took the social-cognitive

perspective and conceptualized the moral identity in the form of an associated network of moral behaviors, goals, and traits that constitute one's schema of moral character (Lapsley, 2004; Lapsley and Narvaez, 2004). Conformity theory Bernheim (1994) states that individual behavior is affected at large by such social factors as the desire for prestige, acceptance, or popularity. A person might use several possible identities, moral identity is one of them, as a basis for his self-definition as argued by Reed et al. (2007).

People with a high level of Machiavellianism are more likely to get engaged in such behaviors that might lead them to achieve their objectives by any means, legitimate or otherwise (Amir and Malik, 2016). Based on the main value of Machiavellianism, which is "ends justify the means," such people could be high achievers, and in their way to do so, they are more likely exposed to engage in work counterproductive behavior. As a personality construct, Machiavellianism promotes that one's manipulative deeds are justified as long as one achieves the desired outcomes. Machiavellians might try to get ahead of colleagues at any cost, moral or not (Hegarty and Sims, 1979; Gunnthorsdottir et al., 2002; Granitz, 2003; Chen and Tang, 2006). Leaders with a high level of Machiavellianism were found engaged in taking unethical decisions for their self-interest as proved by O'Fallon and Butterfield (2013). In addition, several studies support that they involve in unethical opportunistic behavior such as bullying, among other counterproductive behaviors such as cheating, theft, lying, and sabotage. They mainly show high levels of compromised wellbeing, dissatisfaction, and anxiety rather than the lack of guilt feeling for committing deviant actions (Dahling et al., 2009, 2012). But among the affecting factors in this, the literature finds organizational structure and setup, the type of jobs they perform, the career level, skills, and the level of rewards offered to goal-achieving (Jones and Paulhus, 2009). Due to the perspective of high-level Machiavellians and the fact that they are prone to involve in politics with organizations, they tend to look at the moves of others, superiors, peers, and subordinates, as political moves (O'connor and Morrison, 2001; O'Connor et al., 2017). Hence, they tend to use manipulative tactics to be in the spotlight as favorable to others, peers, and superiors (O'Hair and Cody, 1987). In addition to that, they were found highly career-oriented supervisors, taking roles of leadership to influence their co-workers as demonstrated by Kacmar et al. (2004). As moral identity plays the role of a self-regulatory mechanism to propagate moral actions as argued by Reed et al. (2007), people whose position high self-importance on the moral identity get less involved in unethical opportunistic behaviors than do those who place less importance of self-concept (Reed et al., 2007; Burris et al., 2008). The study of Aquino and Reed (2002) demonstrated that there are two dimensions of moral identity, being rooted in the very core of one's being and as being true to oneself in action. They labeled them as the dimensions of internalization and symbolization. The first (internalization) corresponds to the level to which the set of moral trains is central to the self-concept, whereas the latter (symbolization) corresponds to the level to which such traits are expressed explicitly *via* the individual's action in a social context.

From the theoretical lenses, this study adds important theoretical insights into the body of knowledge and tends to add new links. First, this study adds to the literature about symbolization and contends that symbolization has the potency to increase the prosocial behavior and psychological wellbeing of college students. This is the contribution of the study from a theoretical perspective. Similarly, this study also extended the literature related to internalization and contends that internalization promotes psychological wellbeing but it does not promote prosocial behavior, which calls for further investigation. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, this study adds to the body of knowledge related to moral reasoning, this study tested the mediating role of moral reasoning and extends the literature by adding that moral reasoning has the potency to increase the prosocial behavior and psychological well-being under the influence of symbolization and internalization. From the practical point of view, this study advocates that policymakers should promote the senses of symbolization and internalization to increase the pro-social behavior and psychological wellbeing of college students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Symbolization, Internalization, Prosocial Behavior, and Psychological Wellbeing

Winterich et al. (2013) argue that symbolization represents the level to which a person might tend to convey his moral identity to the external side *via* actions in the world. The one with a high level of symbolization dimension is the one who has the tendency to be involved in explicit activities that might transfer to others the commitment to specific moral ideas and goals. On the other side, when one has a low level of the symbolization dimension of moral identity, he would incline to get involved in such types of public activities. In the model developed by Aquino and Reed (2002), the levels of both dimensions, internalization, and symbolization, do not necessarily correspond to each other, even though there must be some sort of a positive relationship for both of them (Winterich et al., 2013). Rothbard (2001) connotes that intrinsic motivation can be distinguished from absorption as it is specifically task-oriented with a state of positive emotion while absorption is a neutral state. Self-regulation explains the mechanism of linking absorption and attention to engagement theoretically (Lee et al., 2003). Moreover, Kanfer (1990) further clarifies the concept of self-regulation as a process of converting inner impelling cause into behavior stimulus and performance. Resultantly, this order of attention enables an employee to allocate exclusive efforts for on-task and off-task performances related behaviors. According to Ryan and Deci (2001), well-being is optimal functioning and experience. It is parallel to the notion, that individual utility or wellbeing denotes the point of satisfaction where ones' preferences are satisfied. The concept of wellbeing is based upon two philosophies termed hedonism and eudemonism. Kahneman et al. (2004) relate the hedonic view of wellbeing with positive emotions of happiness and pleasure. While on the other hand, eudemonism is seen as the cultivation of personal resources and their positive contribution, exercising

efforts in compliance with one's inner satisfaction and beliefs (Waterman, 1993). Thus, pleasure and happiness are the focus of hedonic approaches to wellbeing. Diener et al. (1985) state that the most well-known model established for this approach is subjective wellbeing, composed of three main components; the presence of positive affect, satisfaction with life, and the absence of negative affect. The beneficial treatment of the organization such as fairness and supervisor support results in favorable outcomes such as the development of positive emotions and overall satisfaction.

Moreover, the virtue of mindfulness (moral responsibility) assumes a sense of responsibility resulting in symbolization. As advocated by Pandey et al. (2018) in earlier research, mindfulness as moral responsibility has the potency to mitigate the egocentric bias. Moral responsibility can trigger employees to opt a rationalized decision-making, which further can provoke positive behaviors among employees (Jennings et al., 2015). However, moral judgment cannot truly portray how individuals will attempt to address moral issues in the first place (Jennings et al., 2015), but moral judgments can lead toward the betterment of others in the workplace. Moreover, the moral judgment does not automatically lead to moral action; moral actions are influenced by perceptions of individuals and their virtues because these promote moral responsibility. The reason is that when an employee feels that he or she is morally responsible due to the influence of moral principles (Williams and Gantt, 2012).

H1: *Symbolization has a positive relationship with psychological wellbeing.*

H2: *Symbolization has a positive relationship with pro-social behavior.*

H3: *Internalization has a positive relationship with psychological wellbeing.*

H4: *Internalization has a positive relationship with pro-social behavior.*

Mediating Role of Moral Reasoning

Past studies indicate that moral reasoning is embedded through three phases such as awareness, judgment, intent and behavior, and moral responsibility. The last component, i.e., moral responsibility, tends to deal with individual's sense of accountability related to the betterment of others. While the second part of this concept, i.e., mindfulness states that the development of virtue is a trait as a result of through interventions. Internalization used to be a focus perception in social theory in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linked fields. Previous studies indicate that cultural, social, and behavioral systems force an individual to act in a particular way ethic (Chen and Tang, 2006; Strand and Lizardo, 2015). Simply, society constrained people to act in particular (e.g., prosocial) ways. Thus society tends to constrain people from some potential behaviors within organizations *via* expected emotional, ethical, and intellectual forces. Through the expansion of the theory of the cultural system (Kuper, 2003), "internalization," is the instrument by which people developed all types of social designs (expressive, normative, cognitive, and the like). Thus, it can be a motivating factor to maintain the psychological well-being of individuals across their lifetimes. The reason is that across the life span there come different stages. Thus with the passage of time and age stage the level of psychological wellbeing changes (Olekalns et al., 2014; Strand and Lizardo, 2015). Thus, in this regard, beliefs tend to represent the being "about" various things, events, or people. It is therefore very reasonable to assume that internalization will promote moral reasoning, moral responsibility which will further enhance the prosocial behavior of the employees. We conceptualized that moral reasoning would enhance the employee's intention to be more inclined toward others' betterment and would result in positive behaviors at the workplace, i.e., showing pro-social behaviors.

Internalization holds a central position under the domain of cultural theory in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Based on the theory of cultural systems, internalization is regarded as a tool and mechanism by which the individuals at the workplace shape and adapt all types of patterns related to culture (Kuper, 2003). These patterns can be normative, cognitive, and expressive. Moreover, internalization is termed as a process by which individuals are encultured. Literature related to internalization states that characteristics of a culture are retained by individuals before and after internalization in a system and then these characteristics become properties of individuals (Kelly et al., 2011; Strand and Lizardo, 2015).

A framework, proposed by Schwartz (2016) explains that ethical decision making based on moral reasoning promotes positive behaviors, which can be termed "retrospection" and this process follows a pattern of activities and during this process, emotion, intuition, reason, and rationalization hold a pivotal position and play a crucial role. Moreover, during this process, both individual and organizational factors play a moderating role, thus moral capacity at an individual level and an environment of the organization help to improve this process.

Thus, an individual who internalizes a belief then tends to show or represent the world the picture based on that belief. Hence based on the above argument it can be drawn that:

H5: *Moral reasoning mediates the relationship between symbolization and psychological wellbeing.*

H6: *Moral reasoning mediates the relationship between symbolization and pro-social behavior.*

H7: *Moral reasoning mediates the relationship between internalization and psychological wellbeing.*

H8: *Moral reasoning mediates the relationship between internalization and pro-social behavior.*

Based on the above literature support and hypothesis development the following framework (see **Figure 1**) has been established.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

College students were selected as participants in this study. A two-wave strategy was followed to collect data. To set a

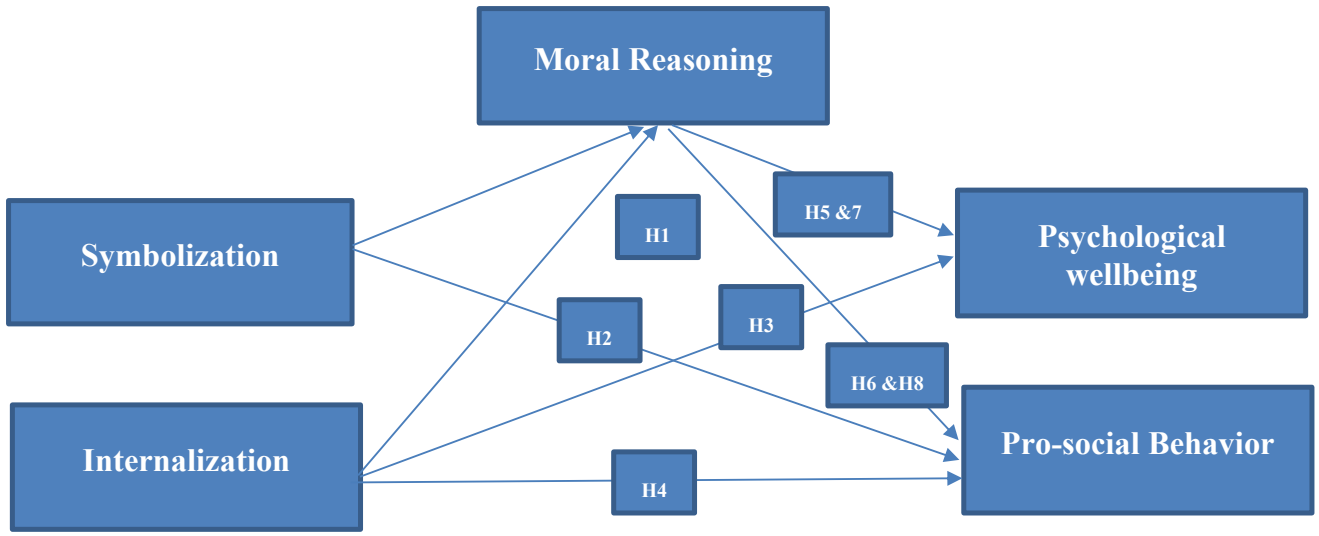

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

suitable and well representative sample size, we followed various sample size recommendations based on previous studies. In this regard Krejcie and Morgan (1970), recommendations were kept under consideration. Although a sample size of 384 is considered suitable according to this criteria, however, we have selected a sample size of 600 to be on the safer side. Moreover, according to the general rule of thumb, a benchmark of five to ten respondents against each study construct is considered reasonable and in this case, a sample size of 50 was sufficient. However, we escalated from this sample size recommendation and selected a larger respondent pool. In the first wave of questionnaire distribution, 600 college students were contacted to complete the response. This hidden and secret code was related to the high school of the respondents so that they could be traced easily. At this stage, demographic characteristics and questions related to both the independent variables were asked from the respondents. However, in the second wave questions related to mediating variables and dependent variables were asked from the respondents and at this wave, 448 questionnaires were received back from the redistributed 507 questionnaires. After discarding the incomplete and partially filled questionnaires (17 questionnaires) there were left only 431 useable responses.

This helped us to reduce the potential measurement error of common method biases (Ng and Feldman, 2013; Newman et al., 2015; Feng and Wang, 2019). Moreover, we used reverse coded questions, to potentially restrict the participants from giving monotonic responses. Additionally, we provide a brief purpose statement to the respondents regarding study objectives and their contribution to the literature (Malhotra et al., 2006). These measures helped us to potentially reduce the common method biases.

Respondents were requested to rate their demographic characteristics. From the perspective of gender, female respondents were slightly higher than the male respondents, i.e., 53% female students and 47% male students. While talking about the age group, all the students were under the age limit of 18–25 years indicating an adult population. All the students were enrolled in their undergraduate study courses.

Measures

Responses were recorded on 5 (5-1) point Likert Scale with a range from strongly agree to strongly disagree where 5 indicates strongly agree and 1 indicates strongly disagree. The first independent variable of this study, i.e., symbolization was assessed based on five items scale. Sample item to measure symbolization includes, "The types of things I do in my spare time (e.g., hobbies)." This scale has been developed by Aquino and Reed (2002) and later on validated by Reed et al. (2007). A second independent variable of this study, internalization is assessed based on four items scale and the sample item for this scale is, "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am." This scale is also developed by Aquino and Reed (2002) and later on validated by Reed et al. (2007). Mediating variable in this study is operationalized based on ten items scale covering the dimension of Conventional Morality. This scale is developed by Christie and Geis (2013), and is known as the Machiavellian IV scale (Mach IV). Previously this scale has been tested and validated by Athota et al. (2009). The dependent variable, prosocial behavior is measured based on pro-sociality in groups. This dimension is most suitable in the context of college students as students tend to form groups in their academic and personal circles. A sample item for this scale includes, "I have shared knowledge with colleagues to help them get ahead." Initially, this scale is developed by Johnson et al. (1989). However, this scale is validated by researchers in the past, most recently this scale is used by Gotowiec and van Mastrigt (2019). This scale has four items. The last dependent variable (psychological wellbeing)

TABLE 1 | Reliability and validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Item	Outer loadings	VIF	Alpha	Rho-A	Composite reliability	AVE
INT	INT1	0.867	2.256	0.882	0.883	0.927	0.810
	INT2	0.938	3.766				
	INT3	0.893	2.646				
MR	MR10	0.727	2.830	0.870	0.891	0.900	0.565
	MR2	0.766	4.599				
	MR3	0.743	1.799				
	MR4	0.898	4.784				
	MR6	0.589	1.370				
	MR8	0.841	4.296				
	MR9	0.656	3.740				
PSB	PSB1	0.806	3.650	0.832	0.844	0.886	0.661
	PSB2	0.846	4.034				
	PSB3	0.789	1.641				
	PSB4	0.809	1.598				
PWB	PWB1	0.804	1.215	0.708	0.774	0.800	0.504
	PWB2	0.558	1.839				
	PWB3	0.750	1.405				
	PWB4	0.704	2.159				
SMB	SM1	0.834	2.145	0.871	0.876	0.907	0.662
	SM2	0.841	2.286				
	SM3	0.845	3.295				
	SM4	0.817	3.370				
	SM5	0.725	1.844				

INT, internalization; MR, moral reasoning; PSB, prosocial behavior; PWB, psychological wellbeing; SMB, symbolization.

of this study is measured based on five items scale recently used by Akram (2019).

RESULTS

We have employed the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique for data analysis. SEM was the most suitable technique in this regard to assess the measurement and structural paths. For this purpose, we have used partial least square (PLS) based SEM. Smart PLS 3.9 provides the best measurement parameters in the case of the PLS approach (Avotra et al., 2021; Nawaz et al., 2022). There were also other reasons to opt for Smart PLS software, mainly it deals very well with the non-parametric data and handles complex models very comfortably (Yingfei et al., 2021).

Both measurement and structural models were assessed. First, the measurement model was assessed based on reliability and validity measures. Reliability is assessed through well-established measures, such as alpha, Rho-A, and composite reliability, while validity is assessed through two approaches namely, convergent validity and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017). **Table 1** in this regard illustrates the reliability and validity measures (convergent validity). First, Cronbach's alpha was scrutinized for all study constructs and it was observed that all the values were within the acceptable limits, i.e., greater than 0.60. The observed range for alpha values is 0.708–0.882 which indicates a satisfactory level. The lowest value in this regard was observed in the case of psychological wellbeing (0.708) while the heights value of alpha were observed for internalization. Similarly, the second measure of reliability was Rho-A, which also indicates a satisfactory level and all the values of Rho-A were within the threshold limit of Rho-A. The last measure of reliability was composite reliability (CR) in this study. Values of CR in this regard indicate a satisfactory level with an observed range of 0.800–0.927. Therefore all the parameters related to reliability indicate a satisfactory level.

Items of the study constructs were scrutinized for poor or weaker outer loading. Items with poor or weaker outer loadings were dropped from analysis to obtain the best parameters. One item from the study constructs internalization was dropped due to poor outer loadings (INT-4). No item was dropped from symbolization and pro-social behavior. While, owing to weaker outer loadings three items (MR-1, MR-5, and MR-7) have been dropped from a total of ten items. Similarly, one item (PWB-5) from the construct psychological wellbeing was removed/dropped from further analysis (Mela and Kopalle, 2002).

Thus outer loading values indicate a sufficient level of indicator reliability/convergent validity. However, some items with weaker outer loadings were retained because the average variance of that construct was within the acceptable limit of equal are greater than 50%. In this regard, MR-6 and MR-9 from the construct moral reasoning while PWB-2 from the construct psychological wellbeing was retained despite weaker or lower outer loading values (**Table 1**). While another measure of convergent validity in this study is average variance extracted (AVE). Values for AVE were located and it has been observed that all the study constructs are sharing more than 50% variance.

TABLE 2 | Discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981 criterion).

Construct	INT	MR	PSB	PWB	SMB
INT	***0.900***				
MR	0.216	***0.752***			
PSB	0.122	0.377	***0.813***		
PWB	0.377	0.495	0.425	***0.710***	
SMB	0.359	0.285	0.260	0.651	***0.814***

INT, internalization; MR, moral reasoning; PSB, prosocial behavior; PWB, psychological wellbeing; SMB, symbolization. Bold indicates the relationships.

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Construct	INT	MR	PSB	PWB	SMB
INT	–	–	–	–	–
MR	0.225	–	–	–	–
PSB	0.140	0.430	–	–	–
PWB	0.426	0.615	0.540	–	–
SMB	0.410	0.301	0.295	0.658	–

INT, internalization; MR, moral reasoning; PSB, prosocial behavior; PWB, psychological wellbeing; SMB, symbolization.

A higher level of AVE is observed for the study construct internalization, while lower AVE has been observed in the case of psychological wellbeing.

The second measure of validity is discriminant validity which is assessed based on Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion and HTMT ratio (Hair et al., 2017) (see **Tables 2**, **3**). Smart PLS provides a new method to assess the discriminant validity through the HTMT ratio. The first criterion used in this study is Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. **Table 3** in this regard illustrates that the square root of AVE of the respective construct is higher than the correlations in the respective column and row. For instance square root of AVE of internalization is 0.90 which is higher than the correlation values in that column, and all the values are less than this square root. A similar pattern is seen in the case of moral reasoning where the square root is higher than the respective correlations in row and column. While the square root of prosocial behavior is also higher than the correlations in row and column. The same pattern is observed for other study constructs, psychological wellbeing and symbolization (Hair et al., 2011). Thus, discriminant validity based on the Fornell–Larcker Criterion is established.

Another measure of discriminant validity in this study is followed based on recommendations by Hair et al. (2014) and HTMT ratios among study constructs were scrutinized for recommended criteria. **Table 3** illustrates that HTMT ratios among study constructs depict an acceptable level for both conservative and liberal criteria, because HTMT ratio values are less than 0.85 and 0.90, thus meeting the condition of both liberal and conservative criteria and indicating the establishment of discriminant validity.

Model fitness was measured based on effect size while predictive capability was assessed based on the coefficient of determination. First, model fitness based on effect size indicates a satisfactory level of effect size, and values were observed as good. For instance effect size in the case of PWB is observed as 0.204 and 0.479. While talking to a coefficient of determination (predictive accuracy) R-square values indicate a good level of predictive accuracy. **Figure 2** indicates a 9% change was being observed in moral reasoning, while 16% change was observed in prosocial behavior due to predictors and mediating variables. Similarly, 54% change was observed in psychological wellbeing due to the predictors and mediating variable (moral reasoning) (Hair et al., 2017). In addition to this predictive relevance was also checked and it has been found that the value of Q^2 was higher than the acceptable limit of zero, thus indicating a satisfactory level of predictive relevance (An et al., 2021; Huo et al., 2021).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses testing have been done based on t and p statistics. **Table 4** in this regard provides details regarding direct, indirect, and total paths, while **Table 5** discusses the hypotheses testing. In the case of mediation analysis, we have opted to test the significance of indirect effects while simple hypotheses have been tested based on direct path effects. Thus, the first hypothesis (H1) of this study which is related to the impact of symbolization on psychological wellbeing has been found statistically significant as evident by p and t statistics (t = 10.684 and p = 0.000). Path coefficient in this relationship indicates that one unit change in symbolization will bring 0.516 unit change in the psychological welling among the college students. Moreover, a sign of this path is positive which indicates that symbolization has a positive impact on psychological wellbeing, thus, H1 is accepted. Similarly, H2 of this study is related to the impact of symbolization on the prosocial behavior of college students. Statistical data indicates that statistical parameters for this path are significant (t = 3.031 and p = 0.002) and depict that one unit change in symbolization will bring 0.169 unit change in prosocial behavior of the college students, thus, H2 is accepted. Similarly, the third hypothesis (H3) of this study is related to the relationship between internalization and psychological wellbeing. Statistical parameters indicate that internalization brings positive change in psychological wellbeing and one unit change in internalization will bring 0.123 unit change in psychological wellbeing. Moreover, this path is statistically significant as evident by p and t statistics (t = 3.543 and p = 0.000). Thus, H3 of this study is supported by the results. While talking to the fourth hypothesis of this study (H4) it has been observed that the impact of internalization of prosocial behavior of the college students is not statistically significant as evident by the t and p statistics of this path (**Table 5**). P-value escalated in this case from the threshold value, thus, H4 is not supported in this case. The reason for this behavior might be the fact that human beings get irrational (Mazar and Ariely, 2006) when they encounter the opportunity to act opportunistically for their interest, and humans usually are tempted to act in this way (Jensen and Meckling, 1976).

While mediation hypotheses have been tested based on indirect effects. The first mediation hypothesis (H5) is related to mediating role of moral reasoning in the relationships of symbolization and psychological wellbeing (SMB MR

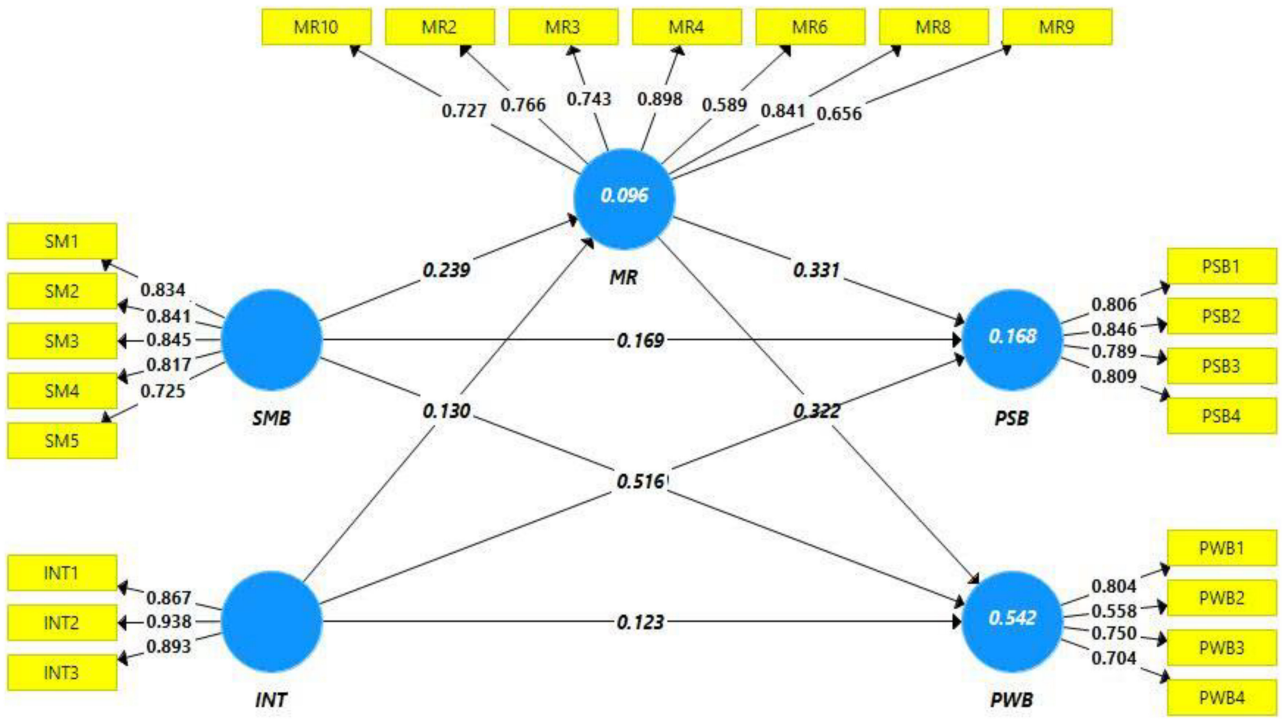

FIGURE 2 | Path estimates and outer loadings.

TABLE 4 | Direct, indirect and total path estimates.

Direct path	Beta	SD	*t*	*p*
INT - > MR	0.130	0.059	2.218	**0.027**
INT - > PSB	−0.010	0.051	0.190	**0.849**
INT - > PWB	0.123	0.035	3.543	**0.000**
MR - > PSB	0.331	0.041	8.120	**0.000**
MR - > PWB	0.322	0.039	8.207	**0.000**
SMB - > MR	0.239	0.043	5.511	**0.000**
SMB - > PSB	0.169	0.056	3.031	**0.002**
SMB - > PWB	0.516	0.048	10.684	**0.000**
Indirect path	**Beta**	**SD**	***t***	***p***
SMB - > MR - > PSB	0.079	0.017	4.534	**0.000**
SMB - > MR - > PWB	0.077	0.017	4.59	**0.000**
INT - > MR - > PSB	0.043	0.021	2.077	**0.038**
INT - > MR - > PWB	0.042	0.020	2.113	**0.035**
Total path	**Beta**	**SD**	***t***	***p***
INT - > PSB	0.033	0.058	0.575	**0.566**
INT - > PWB	0.164	0.040	4.132	**0.000**

INT, internalization; MR, moral reasoning; PSB, prosocial behavior; PWB, psychological wellbeing; SMB, symbolization. Bold indicates the relationships.

PWB). This path was assessed based on indirect effect, for which both t and p statistics are significant which indicates that moral reasoning mediates the relationship between symbolization and psychological wellbeing. Thus, H5 is supported by the study results. Similarly, H6 is related to the mediating role of moral reasoning between the relationships of symbolization and prosocial behavior (SMB MR PSB). This path was also assessed based on indirect effect, for which both t and p statistics are significant which indicates that moral reasoning mediates the relationship between symbolization and prosocial behavior. Thus, H6 is supported by the study results.

The other two mediating hypotheses are related to the mediating role of moral reasoning between the relationship of internalization and psychological wellbeing, prosocial behavior. H6 in this regard was assessed based on indirect effect and it has been found moral reasoning mediates the relationship between internalization and psychological wellbeing as evident by t and p statistics related to H7 (indirect path). Thus, H7 is supported. The last and final hypothesis of this study is based on the mediating role of moral reasoning between the relationships of internalization and prosocial behavior. The indirect effect of this path is found statistically significant as evident by p and t statistics (see **Table 5**). Thus, H8 of this study is supported by the results. In this regard, beliefs tend to represent the being "about" various things, events, or people. It is therefore very reasonable to assume that internalization will promote moral reasoning moral responsibility and which will further enhance the prosocial behavior of the employees. Our conceptualization has been found true that moral reasoning would enhance the employee's intention to be more inclined toward others' betterment and would result in positive behaviors at the workplace, i.e., showing pro-social behaviors.

The findings of the study support the relationship which is in line with (Cropanzano et al., 1997). These findings are in

TABLE 5 | Hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses		Coefficient (Beta)	S.D	*t*	*p*	Status
H1	SMB - > PWB	0.516	0.048	10.684	0.000	Supported
H2	SMB - > PSB	0.169	0.056	3.031	0.002	Supported
H3	INT - > PWB	0.123	0.035	3.543	0.000	Supported
H4	INT - > PSB	−0.010	0.051	0.190	0.849	Not Supported
Mediation hypotheses		**Coefficient (Beta)**	**S.D**	***t***	***p***	**Status**
H5	SMB - > MR - > PWB	0.077	0.017	4.590	0.000	Supported
H6	SMB - > MR - > PSB	0.079	0.017	4.534	0.000	Supported
H7	INT - > MR - > PWB	0.042	0.020	2.113	0.035	Supported
H8	INT - > MR - > PSB	0.043	0.021	2.077	0.038	Supported

INT, internalization; MR, moral reasoning; PSB, prosocial behavior; PWB, psychological wellbeing; SMB, symbolization.

connection with the previous studies and indicate that employees may show wellbeing for others when they internalize themselves with the organizational culture (Dahling et al., 2009, 2012).

Internalization holds a central position under the domain of cultural theory in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Based on the theory of cultural systems, internalization is regarded as a tool and mechanism by which the individuals at the workplace shape and adapt all types of patterns related to culture (Kuper, 2003). These patterns can be normative, cognitive, and expressive. Moreover, internalization is termed as a process by which individuals are encultured. Literature related to internalization states that characteristics of a culture are retained by individuals before and after internalization in a system and then these characteristics become properties of individuals (Strand and Lizardo, 2015).

In alignment with the previous studies, this study also endorses the findings that organizational structure and setup can affect the employees' pro-social behaviors (Jones and Paulhus, 2009). The reason might be that due to the perspective of high-level Machiavellians and the fact that they are prone to involve in politics with organizations, they tend to look at the moves of others, superiors, peers, and subordinates, as political moves (O'connor and Morrison, 2001; O'Connor et al., 2017). One more reason might be that they tend to use manipulative tactics to be in the spotlight as favorable to others, peers, and superiors (O'Hair and Cody, 1987). As moral identity plays the role of a self-regulatory mechanism to propagate moral actions as argued by Reed et al. (2007), people who position high self-importance on the moral identity get less involved in unethical opportunistic behaviors than do those who place less importance of self-concept (Reed et al., 2007; Burris et al., 2008). Findings are also endorsed by the theory of the cultural system (Kuper, 2003), which states that "internalization," is the instrument by which people developed all types of social designs (expressive, normative, cognitive, and the like). So, internalization in culture can be a motivating factor to maintain the psychological well-being of individuals across their lifetimes. The reason is that across the life span there come different stages. Thus with the passage of time and age stage the level of psychological wellbeing changes (Strand and Lizardo, 2015).

CONCLUSION

From the empirical findings of this study, it can be concluded that symbolization promotes positive changes in the psychological wellbeing of the students and there is a need to promote symbolization among students to enhance their psychological wellbeing. It will be quite beneficial for the students, which will help them to grow in their future life. Similarly, symbolization can increase the prosocial behavior of college students. This improvement in the prosocial behavior of the students can help them to become active members of society as well as they can become good workers in their professional careers. While talking about the impact of internalization on psychological wellbeing, it can be safely concluded that promoting internalization will increase psychological wellbeing. However, internalization doesn't need to promote the prosocial behavior of college students. The reason might be that internalization is related to the specific institute while prosocial behavior is not directed toward that specific institute. Moreover, it can be safely concluded that moral reasoning has the potency to mediate the relationship between symbolization and psychological wellbeing. Simply, symbolization promotes moral reasoning which will further increase psychological wellbeing. Similarly, symbolization promotes moral reasoning which further increases prosocial behavior. While in the case of internalization, it can be concluded that moral reasoning mediates the relationship between internalization and psychological wellbeing. Similarly, internalization promotes moral reasoning which further triggers college students to show prosocial behavior. This study's conceptualization has been found true that moral reasoning would enhance the employee's intention to be more inclined toward others' betterment and would result in positive behaviors at the workplace, i.e., showing pro-social behaviors.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From the theoretical lenses, this study adds important theoretical insights into the body of knowledge and tends to add new links. First, this study adds to the literature about symbolization and contends that symbolization has the potency to increase

the prosocial behavior and psychological wellbeing of college students. This is the contribution of the study from a theoretical perspective. Similarly, this study also extended the literature related to internalization and contends that internalization promotes psychological wellbeing but it does not promote prosocial behavior, which calls for further investigation. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, this study adds to the body of knowledge related to moral reasoning, this study tested the mediating role of moral reasoning and extends the literature by adding that moral reasoning has the potency to increase the prosocial behavior and psychological well-being under the influence of symbolization and internalization. From the practical point of view, this study advocates that policymakers should promote the senses of symbolization and internalization to increase the pro-social behavior and psychological wellbeing of college students.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

First, this study collected data from college students, and thus their perception can be influenced by so many factors, just as age and gender, while we have not tested the role of demographic characteristics in this study, in the future exploring the role of gender in defining prosocial behavior and psychological wellbeing might bring different results. Similarly, increasing the number of respondents can provide more detailed insights into the future. This study used only one variable as a mediating mechanism, so by adding other mediating or moderating mechanisms, such as their academic performance, the parental profession can provide important results in the future. Moreover, opportunistic behavior can also be taken as moderating phenomenon in future studies because it is stemmed from economics, and is traditionally viewed as a self-interest act (Chohan, 2020), so might provide important insights for future studies. In future studies, leadership style should also be studied in such behaviors as employees might find highly career-oriented supervisors as key players in predicting their helping behaviors (Kacmar et al., 2004). Machiavellianism is more likely to get engaged in such behaviors that might lead them to achieve their objectives by any means, legitimate or otherwise (Amir and Malik, 2016). Such people could be high achievers, and in their way to do so, they are more likely exposed to engage in work counterproductive behavior. Thus in future studies, counterproductive behavior should also be studied along with the personality traits. As a personality construct, Machiavellianism promotes that one's manipulative deeds are justified as long as one achieves the desired outcomes. Machiavellians might try to get ahead of colleagues at any cost, moral or not (Gunnthorsdottir et al., 2002; Chen and Tang, 2006).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Xi'an Aeronautical University, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

WH: conceptualization, data collection, and writing the draft.

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Teachers' Value Consonance and Employee-Based Brand Equity: The Mediating Role of Belongingness and Self-Efficacy

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This study investigated the impact of value consonance on employee-based brand equity through the mediating role of teachers' self-efficacy and belongingness. For this purpose, a deductive approach was followed, and data were collected under a cross-sectional research design from academia through a questionnaire. Prior approval from the administration was sought before administrating the questionnaire on a large scale and a sample of 520 teachers was approached in the first phase. At this stage, 418 answered questionnaires were received, while in the second wave, questions related to the teacher's self-efficacy and employee-based brand equity were asked from the respondents. Out of these 418 re-distributed questionnaires, 387 were received back and after discarding the partially filled and incomplete questionnaires, the useable sample size was left as 372. Data have been analyzed by using the structural equation modeling technique, which was assessed through measurement and structural model. Results indicate that value consonance can promote positive behaviors in the workplace. Moreover, teachers with high self-efficacy can develop based on brand equity. Similarly, employees with high-value consonance develop a sense of belongingness with their academic institutes. Limitations and future directions are also discussed.

Keywords: value consonance, teachers self-efficacy, belongingness, employee brand based equity, employee behavior and attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

Branding has got new dimensions and due to its competitive nature, it has become the most sought-after commodity in organizations (Urde, 2016). (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004) claimed that branding isn't just about things or commodities; it is more about people. Additionally, branding was originally utilized to distinguish between services and goods, but it evolved through time to be connected to individuals, allowing corporations to differentiate themselves from competitors. Internal branding is a multi-dimensional approach that is used to promote an organization's brand among its personnel (Biswas). According to several experts, brand characteristics are transferred

from corporations to consumers *via* employees who interact with consumers' requirements (King and Grace, 2008).

Seemingly, many company employees utilize internal branding for engaging new employees and sending out important thoughts about the organization. In the service industry, brand equity has received special attention. According to an example (Berry, 2000), service BE is established by successful brand service and customer experiences, based on the development of a service-branding paradigm. Interestingly, there are several inconsistencies among the various systems often used to measure based brand equity, because they do not concur within the same parameters and, therefore, do not fully emphasize the determinant factors and the parameters of based brand equity in the service business (Mourad et al., 2020).

In reaction to global student mobility and declining institutional finance, higher education institutions have been forced to compete for student enrollment. Higher education institutions have been obliged to implement branding and corporate brand initiatives as market demands have increased (Palmer et al., 2016). As a result of these developments, the primary goal appears to be to concentrate on brand construction that is based on two-way interaction within the branding strategy while also acknowledging the contributions of institutions and faculties to branding. Because a great institutional brand has the power to capture clients' trust and loyalty, the expenditure on branding educational institutions has increased dramatically (Pinar et al., 2014).

However, regarding an argument that higher education and branding go back a long way, the literature on branding in higher education is scant. The notion that branding in the non-profit sector promotes unhealthy rivalry and is a waste of resources is debunked by the awareness that established companies are strategic assets in the industry that create brand value. Even though educational institutes are a mix of locations, classes, programs, and certifications, branding has now become critical in managing this service (Retamosa et al., 2020). Personal values relating to one's activities, as well as environmental influences, are significant components that give inspiration and judgment calls.

Quite recently, a study has found that, in conjunction with one's convictions, how these values coincide with the perceived values espoused by one's employer affects professional wellbeing and perseverance (Edwards and Cable, 2009). Such perceived fit among personal and corporate values, known as value consonance, is increasingly being studied as a socio-cultural measure of wellbeing in work situations (Edwards and Cable, 2009). Perceived consonance between someone's values and those of someone's employer has been shown to have a favorable effect on perseverance and psychological wellbeing, as evidenced by increased employee satisfaction, organizational identity, effective communication, and inclination to continue (Edwards and Cable, 2009).

Increased levels of consonance among teachers' values and that of their campus community (i.e., estimated scores throughout teaching staff at their college/university) have been linked to greater job satisfaction, higher work commitment, reduced exhaustion in the teaching profession, and is also likely related to communicated teaching exuberance in the classroom (Wang and Hall, 2019). There are two types of self-efficacy mentioned in reported literature on educational contexts, i.e., teachers' self-efficacy and collective teachers' self-efficacy (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2019). Teachers' self-efficacy, or instructors' willingness and ability to plan and carry out the actions necessary to achieve specific goals, has garnered considerable attention in educational research over the last few decades.

Teacher self-efficacy is linked to several good outcomes, including better levels of teacher engagement and work satisfaction, as well as reduced levels of stress and burnout (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2019). Teachers' self-efficacy is a powerful tool for evaluating the well-being of the teachers and job satisfaction has been explored well (Barni et al., 2019). Several types of research have shown the importance to investigate the relationship between different aspects of professional competence, instructional behavior, and academic achievement gains. However, just a few studies have looked into the relationship between teachers' tendencies and their professional commitment (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2019), particularly in terms of building brand equity among themselves as employee-based brand equity (EBBE).

Situational discord or consonance can have major consequences on a person's relationship with his or her surroundings (Rosenberg, 1977). Cognitive dissonance can lead to a sense of someone not belonging, a sense that someone does not belong, that one is out of place, and that one is doing something wrong. Sense of belonging is defined, according to one study (Cueto et al., 2009), as the degree to which people feel socially attached. The desire to be a part of something larger than oneself is a universal human desire. Belongingness, or the sense of belonging, encompasses the urge to be recognized and associated with a specific group. The desire to belong to a group can be found among school pupils, colleagues, a sporting team, a teaching team, or a community group. A sense of belonging extends beyond knowing exactly or being acknowledged by others. Gaining recognition, acceptance, and encouragement from group members, as well as doing the same, on the other hand, are the main motivations of belongingness (Cueto et al., 2009).

Learners' sense of belonging is defined as "the extent to which they feel connected with their classmates and teachers at educational institutes. Teachers' belongingness at the institute can be described as the extent to which they experience being integrated with institutions, authorities, and learners, based on this perspective. Furthermore, belongingness, according to one study (Goodenow, 1993), necessitates feelings of being accepted, appreciated, and cherished. Additionally, teachers who are apprehensive about reflecting ideas that are incompatible with their values may face cognitive dissonance, making teaching and class administration uncomfortable. An individual in a consonant setting, on the other hand, seems to be more likely to feel like they belong (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2019).

This based brand equity has been utilized in different service sectors and as part of the service sector, higher education

institutes could also be evaluated for their based brand equity (Mourad et al., 2020). The findings of (Mourad et al., 2020)'s research suggested further exploration of based brand equity in the context of higher educational institutes. Keeping in mind the role of teachers as employees in educational institutes could lead to employee-based brand equity. No such research has been carried out in past for evaluating the teachers' value consonance in developing based brand equity so to bridge this gap in previous investigations, this study is providing a novel integration of the supposed connections.

As discussed by Barni et al. (2019), teachers' self-efficacy could lead to teachers' wellbeing and job satisfaction, we assume that it could also help in developing based brand equity in educational institutes while being utilized as a mediator, therefore mediating the impact of teachers' self-efficacy was also evaluated between teachers' value consonance and based brand equity. As suggested by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2019), the belongingness of teachers is connected with their value consonance so, we utilized it as a mediator as well which could further help in strengthening based brand equity. This research would answer certain questions about the association of teachers' value consonance with based brand equity with the help of teachers' self-efficacy and belongingness.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

"Efficacy beliefs influence how environmental possibilities and barriers are evaluated," according to social cognition theory (Lee et al., 2019). As a result, people's objectives, motivation, and behaviors are influenced by their self-efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy is linked to better levels of teacher engagement, work satisfaction, and dedication, as well as relatively low levels of depression and desire to quit the profession, according to research (Moyano et al., 2021). Individuals, according to Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, have a self-structure that lets them exert some control over their ideas, emotions, motivation, as well as behaviors. This self-system includes reference mechanisms as well as a collection of modules for observing, controlling, as well as assessing behavior in any way of the system's engagement with environmental factors that have an impact. As such, it performs a self-regulatory role by allowing individuals to affect their internal cognitive patterns and behaviors, so modifying their surroundings (Diestel, 2021).

A person can maintain influence over whatever he or she performs, according to Bandura's social cognitive theory, but there is a reciprocating link between a person's conduct and the environment, with his or her cognition (Bandura, 1999). Self-efficacy is a component of Bandura's social cognitive theory that changes a person's objectives, behaviors, and actions and is impacted by environmental factors. Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1997, p. 3) as "religious views in one's capacities to plan and manage a business venture necessary to accomplish given attainment". These attitudes, rather than being permanent character qualities, are dynamic and learning structures that are impacted by how people see possibilities and constraints in their surroundings (Preece and Bullingham, 2022).

Value Consonance and Employee-Based Brand Equity

Brand equity (BE), a valuable marketing asset, generates competitive advantages and boosts an organization's financial success. BE research has mostly focused on the customer perceptions of a product's brand value when exposed to branding and marketing elements (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). BE concepts and indicators are diverse but ambiguous and are frequently being measured by business performance. However, among the many concepts, the concept of BE will often incorporate marketing impacts that are exclusive to a given brand (Holiday et al., 2021). The strength of a brand is determined by customers' convictions and impressions based on what they have learned, felt, and seen, as well as heard (Hussain et al., 2020). Because of the growing interest among researchers in brand management, researchers have expanded the variety of indicators used to quantify brand value beyond purely financial factors (Edeling et al., 2020).

Employees' thoughts and opinions, attitudes, and behaviors toward the brand, which appear externally as brand promises, are gathered through their work experiences and contacts with the firm. Employees' positive and constructive brand behaviors that come from brand awareness of the desired behavior connected to the brand identity are classified as EBBE (Moyano et al., 2022). As a result, EBBE refers to workers' internalization of a brand's fundamental values, as seen by brand image and brand loyalty, as well as brand value congruence (Liu et al., 2020). Employee brand endorsement happens when workers communicate beneficial information to individuals outside the business through word of mouth; employee brand loyalty focuses on employees' intentions to stay with the organization (Gamage and Tajeddini, 2022).

Employee conduct that naturally corresponds to organizational principles without explicit teaching is referred to as brand value consistency (Ozuem et al., 2022). All these actions occur on their own and do not require any prior training. Until now, the majority of the studies on the elements that lead to EBBE have focused on employees' psychological perspectives (Hanaysha and Al-Shaikh, 2021). Value consonance is characterized as teachers' belief that they accept the university's dominant values, as well as norms, and about which aims should have been pursued, which content should have been emphasized, and which educational approaches and procedures could've been used (Stacey, 2022). This shows that value consonance has a positive relationship with employee-based brand equity. And from all this previous research this hypothesis shows a positive relationship between them.

H_1: *Value consonance is positively related to employee-based brand equity*

Value Consonance and Teachers' Self-Efficacy

Value consonance is characterized as how instructors believe they embrace the university's prevalent values and norms, such as goals that should have been pursued, material that should be stressed, and educational techniques and procedures that should be employed (Stacey, 2022). A teacher who believes

in the university's prevailing principles and rules that are contradictory to his or her own beliefs may experience contextual contradiction, whereas a teacher who appreciates the university's prevalent norms and values may suffer contextual consonance (Wernhart et al., 2019). Contextual consonance, as well as dissonance, can emerge in social identity settings, competency contexts, contextual factors, and even cultural contexts (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2019).

Under social cognitive theory and social cognitive career theory, self-efficacy has been identified as the most potent self-regulatory tool for influencing work behavior, motives, and target behavior (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, experts have defined the teacher-related component of self-efficacy as a teacher's belief in their ability to successfully execute a given teaching job required to achieve certain goals in a specific situation. As per available literature on this kind of relationship, value consonance has been linked to self-efficacy in high school students, service employees, and office staff (Nangoy, 2018). Some authors (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2019) also claimed that value contention (the polar opposite of value consonance) affects teachers' self-efficacy. The instructors' confidence in their talents declines when they believe that the schools' dominant principles are incompatible with their convictions. As a result, we anticipate that value consonance will help in shaping teachers' self-efficacy.

Additionally, Rosenberg defined the value context as the link between a given person's feature and the value assigned to that attribute in the perspective of that individual's surroundings (Rosenberg, 1977). We extend the idea to include the alignment of a teacher's aims, conventions, and attitudes regarding teaching and education, with the goals, social standards, and values that exist, at the university where he or she is employed. Enhancing the learning experiences, vicarious learning, social competence, and physiological and emotional states are all sources of information that influence self-efficacy beliefs (Myyry et al., 2022). As a result, the current work fulfills this need by examining the positive relationship between value consonance and teacher self-efficacy.

H_2: *Value consonance is positively related to teacher self-efficacy*

Value Consonance and Belongingness

Belonging is defined as a sense of affiliation and worth (Fan et al., 2020). A sense of belonging, according to Fan et al. (2020), is derived from a sense of being accepted, respected, and getting social support from other members of the community. As a result, we predicted teachers' feelings of belonging to be favorably related to pleasant and supportive relationships with colleagues and the university administration (Greenier et al., 2021). We also anticipated that value consonance would be linked to a sense of belonging, as sharing values promotes acceptance and respect. A previous study has found a moderate to the high link between value consonance and teachers' feelings of belonging, which supports this hypothesis (Jensen, 2022).

The desire to belong is an essential human motivator, according to Turk et al. (2022). The degree to which they want to belong is met, for example at work, can have an impact on motivation, dedication, and also well. At the student level, a sense of belonging to the university or a college class is linked to academic motivation and good effect (Marler et al., 2021). A study (Mérida-López et al., 2022) also found that teachers' feelings of belonging at their place of employment were linked to increased work satisfaction and reduced levels of emotional weariness.

Situational disharmony or consonance might have major consequences on a person's interaction with his or her surroundings. Situational dissonance can lead to a sense of someone not belonging, a sense that one does not belong, because one is out of place or he is doing something wrong (Rosenberg, 1977). Additionally, teachers who are worried about reflecting ideas that are incompatible with their values may feel cognitive dissonance, making education and instructional management uncomfortable. An individual in a consonant setting, on the other hand, is much more inclined to feel like he belongs. So, in accord with the supported arguments, it could be suggested that teachers' feelings of belongingness are positively connected to value consonance. As a result, the previous studies support this need by examining the hypothesis given below.

H_3: *Value consonance is positively related to Belongingness*

Mediating the Relationship Between Value Consonance and Employee-Based Brand Equity

The teacher's self-efficacy component of social cognition theory has been thoroughly examined in a variety of disciplines and situations, and it has gained support from a substantial number of data from a variety of domains (Fryer et al., 2021). Teachers necessarily communicate, as well as reflect ideas, in their regular teaching and classroom management. The goal of this study was to investigate the relationships between teachers' perceptions of university-level values represented by the university's goal structure, as well as value consonance (the extent to which they felt they decided to share the university's prevailing principles and rules), teachers' feelings of belonging, perceived stress, EBBE, and work satisfaction, as well as motivation to end up leaving the teaching profession (Howe et al., 2019).

Belonging is placed in the center of the pyramid of the motivational hierarchy. It is a requirement, as one study (Wernhart et al., 2019) showed out, as well as its absence has severe consequences. Belongingness is connected to several topics, such as directors' attitudes and behaviors toward employees, organizational styles and communication levels of all employees in the workplace, the degree to which socially and economically expectations for work are met, and the working conditions of the employees (Lamm et al., 2015). It differs from commitment because commitment indicates a one-sided connection, whereas belongingness suggests a two-way interaction (Gamage and Tajeddini, 2022).

Teachers' self-efficacy and belongingness mediate the relationship between value consonance and employee-based brand equity. An employee's feeling of belonging influences their actions and attitudes about work-life, and has a favorable impact on their overall performance (Etehadi and Karatepe, 2019). Belongingness is significant because the more an employee

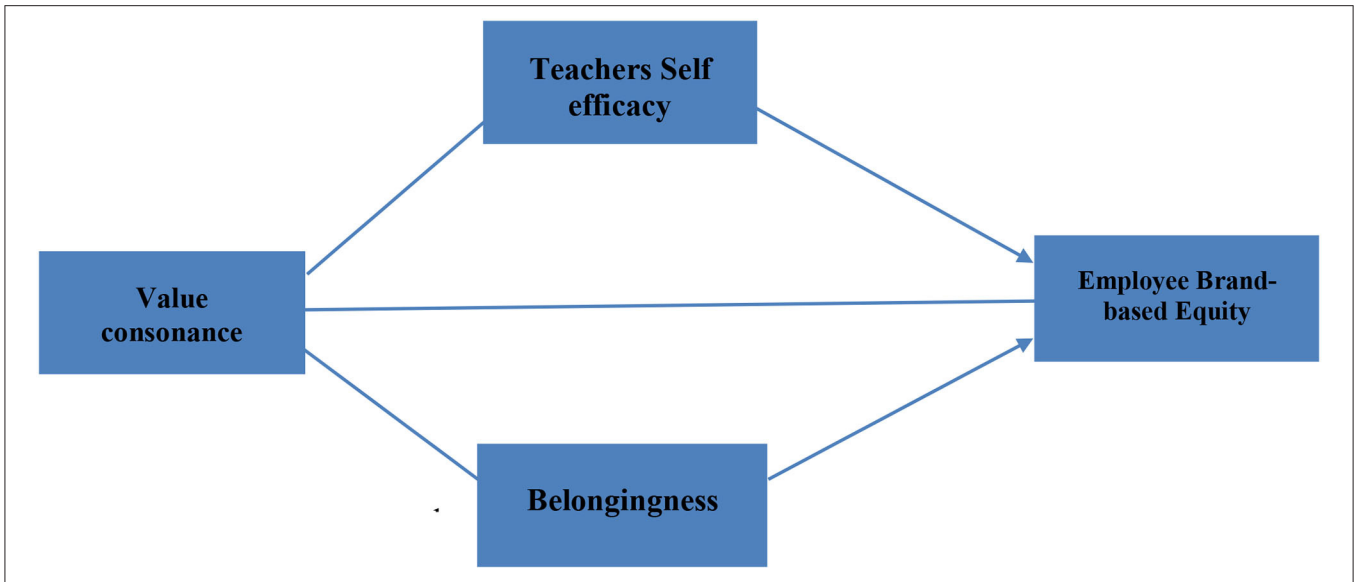

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

understands a workplace's goals and values, as well as thinks he belongs to the organization or institution where he works, the more driven he is to achieve organizational goals and work for the organization.

Employer branding is a multidimensional technique that organizations may use to attract and recruit skilled personnel. Employer branding may be used as a strategic opportunity to improve employee engagement inside a global market when a competent workforce is rare and has many alternatives (Ibrahim et al., 2018). The main concept behind this assumption is that university employees are aware of the university's requirements and pressure, which helps to improve collaboration (Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2021). As a result, the current study investigates this gap by looking at the role of teachers' self-efficacy and belongingness in mediating the link between value consonance and employee-based brand equity.

H_4: Teachers' self-efficacy mediates the relationship between Value consonance and employee-based brand equity
H_5: Belongingness mediates the relationship between Value consonance and employee-based brand equity

The following conceptual model (**Figure 1**) has been formed based on the above literature and hypotheses.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

This study followed a deductive approach and data were collected under a cross-sectional research design. Cross-sectional research design is prevalent in social sciences and was most suitable in this study because this study aimed to quantify the impact of value consonance on employee-based brand equity. Thus, in this study, respondents (teachers) from academia were requested to complete a survey questionnaire. Previous studies have documented the perception of teachers while investigating consonance and self-efficacy (Abun et al., 2021). Prior approval from the administration was sought before administrating the questionnaire on large scale. In addition to this, written informed consent was also obtained from the respondents before handing over the questionnaires.

A list of faculty/teaching staff was obtained from the administration and teachers were approached as per the available list in their duty time. It was ensured to them that this study is only for academic purposes and their response will be kept confidential. As a goodwill gesture, a 'thank you note was served to the participants to boost their motivation to complete the questionnaire.

Before administrating questionnaires, suitable sample size was set based on the available literature and recommendations from the past studies. In this regard, the most used criteria of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and previously used by Bashir et al. (2019, 2020) and Wu et al. (2022).

Hence, a sample of 520 respondents was devised at the initial stage, and questionnaires were distributed among the teachers in the first phase. At this stage, questions related to demographic characteristics, value consonance (independent variable), and belongingness (mediating variable) were asked from the respondents. A secret code was allotted to each questionnaire so that in the next wave, relevant respondents could be identified easily. At this stage, 418 questionnaires were received back. In the second wave questions related to the teacher self-efficacy (mediating variable) and employee-based brand equity (outcome variable). Out of these 420 re-distributed questionnaires, 387 questionnaires were received back. After discarding the partially filled and incomplete questionnaires, the useable sample size was left as 372 and these responses have been used for final data analysis.

Collecting data in two waves has helped us to overcome the issue of common method biases (Podsakoff, 2003; Malhotra et al.,

2006). Moreover, we have employed other techniques, such as using reverse coded questions to restrict the respondents from providing monotonic responses. In addition to this changing the position of variables in questionnaires (through two waves), helped to restrict the respondents from developing a correlation among the study constructs. Demographic characteristics of the respondents were obtained, and it was observed that most of the respondents were i.e., 71%, while female participants were 29%. In the case of qualification, most of the participants have 18 years of education while respondents with ages more than 30 years were high. Similarly, teachers having experience of >5 years were also greater in numbers as compared to the teachers having experience of fewer than 5 years.

Scales/Measurement

This study followed a 5-point Likert scale to get responses from the participants, where 5 indicates strongly agree and 1 indicates strongly disagree. Value consonance is operationalized based on three items scale developed by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011). Sample items for this scale include, "My colleagues and I have the same opinion about what is important in education". Similarly, the first mediating variable of this study, i.e., teacher self-efficacy is measured based on three dimensions, namely, self-efficacy for instructional strategies and self-efficacy for student engagement. Each dimension was assessed based on four items. This scale is developed by Klassen et al. (2009), sample items for this scale include, "How much can you do to craft good questions for students?". The language of items of this scale was partially modified to fit it in the context of this study. The second mediating variable of this study, i.e., Belongingness is measured based on three items scale developed by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011). Sample items for this scale include, "I feel that I am accepted by the university leadership". The outcome variable of this study (employee-based brand equity) is measured based on five items scale developed by Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010). This sample item includes, "I am aware that everything I say or do can affect the brand image".

RESULTS

Assessment of Measurement and Structural Model

This study used a multivariate data analysis tool by applying structural equation modeling (SEM) based on partial least square (PLS) SEM methodology. For this purpose, Smart PLS 3.9 was used (Ali et al., 2018; Bashir et al., 2020). Smart PLS provides numerous benefits/advantages; firstly, it deals very comfortable with the complex models and it can handle small samples very efficiently (Hair et al., 2017). Additionally, it can deal with the non-normal data very comfortably and non-parametric data is easily handled by Smart PLS lastly it is used when the theory is less developed. In our case where the theory about employee-based brand equity is less developed, so using Smart PLS was the best option. SEM is assessed in two ways, one way is concerned with the assessment of the measurement model, while another portion is related to the assessment of the structural model (Hair et al., 2012,Hair et al., 2019). **Table 1** shows the main results.

TABLE 1 | Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larker-1981 Criteria).

Construct	BL	EBBE	TSE	VC
BL	**0.813**			
EBBE	0.441	**0.737**		
TSE	0.288	0.664	**0.773**	
VC	0.345	0.491	0.300	**0.877**

VC, Value consonance; EBBE, Employee based brand equity; TSE, Teacher self-efficacy; BL, Belongingness. The bold values indicate the results for corresponding statistics for whole variable not the items.

Assessment of the measurement model was done based on reliability and validity. Reliability has been tested based on three parameters, namely, alpha, rho-a, and composite reliability and it has been observed that all the three indicators of reliability are within the acceptable range i.e.,>0.60. For instance, the value of alpha for belongingness is 0.744, for employee-based brand equity is 0.73, for teachers' self-efficacy it is 0.92, and for value consonance, it is 0.855. Thus, the value of alpha for all constructs was above the threshold limit. Similarly, values of composite reliability were also above the prescribed limit. In the case of rho-A values were within the range of 0.76 to 0.93. Hence, all the parameters related to reliability statistics were within the acceptable range and confirmed the reliability of the model and indicated a good reliability level (Hair et al., 2011,Bashir et al., 2020).

While testing the validity, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of the constructs has been evaluated/assessed. It has been observed that the AVE of the respective constructs was higher than 0.50 and indicates a sufficient level of convergent validity (Mela and Kopalle, 2002).

While outer loadings are used as another measure to assess the convergent validity (**Figure 2** and **Table 2**). Here, each item/indicator of scale/construct was inspected for outer loadings, and it was observed that all the indicators pose good outer loading values despite a few items. In this regard, most of the items have outer loading values above the threshold limit of 0.708. All the items of form the construct belongingness possess good outer loadings value. A similar case was observed for value consonance and no item was dropped from this construct. However, one item from the construct employee-based brand equity has been dropped due to poor outer loadings (EBBE-4). Similarly, two items from teachers' self-efficacy, (TSE-10 and TSE-11) were dropped due to weak outer loadings. However, one item with loading <0.708 (TSE-4) was retained, despite poor outer loading because the AVE of this construct was above the threshold value (>*0.50*).

While talking about discriminant validity, this study used the well-established criteria of and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios (Hair et al., 2017). **Tables 3**, **4**, in this regard, illustrate these two criteria. The first criteria in this regard indicate that the square root of the AVE of variables is higher than the correlations among them (Joe F Hair et al., 2011). Hence, the square root of the AVE of each construct is observed larger as compared to the correlation in the

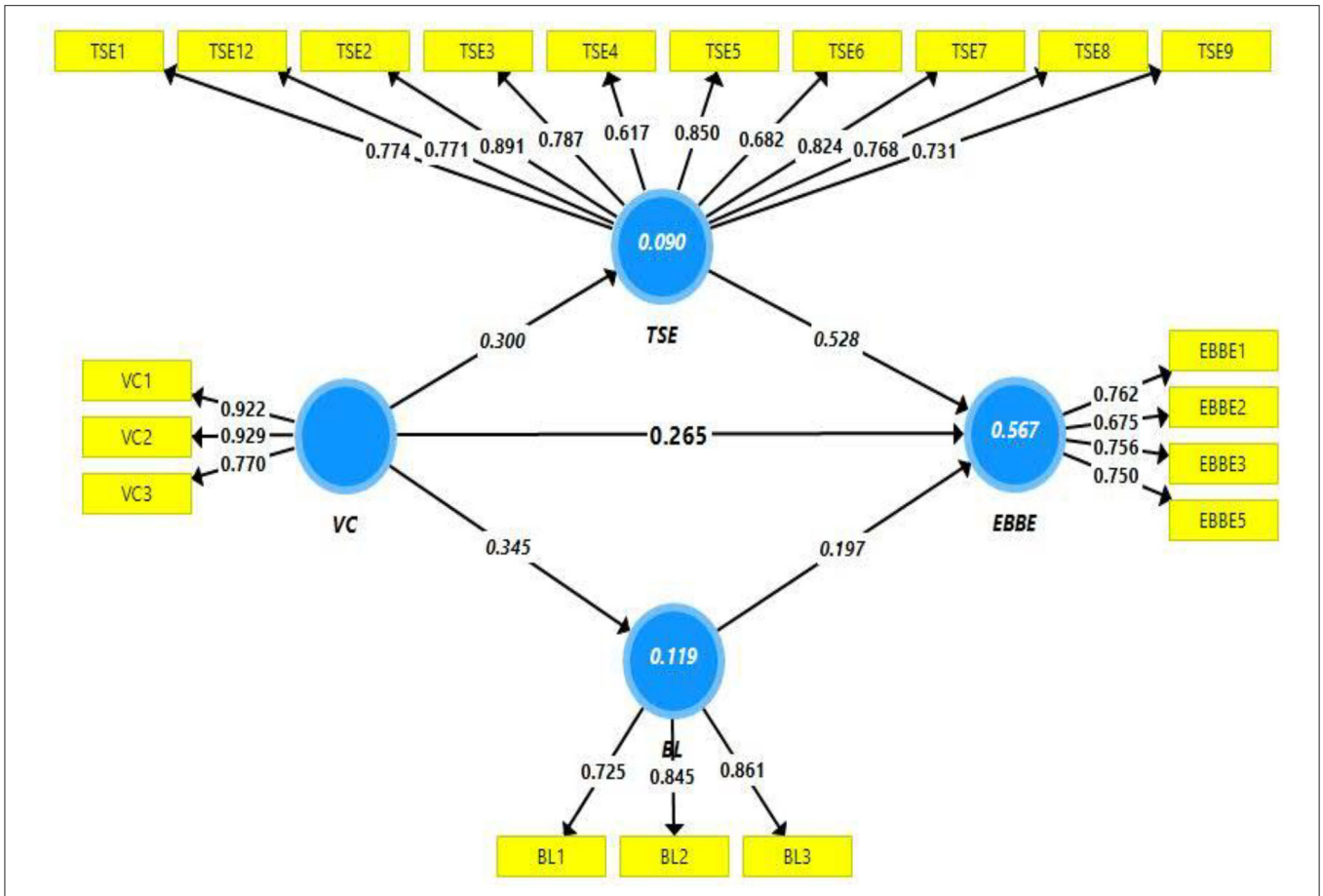

FIGURE 2 | Path estimates.

respective column and row, indicating an established Fornel-Larcker Criteria.

While HTMT has been used as another method to assess the discriminant validity. Both, liberal and conservative criteria of HTMT have been established as values of HTMT ratios in all columns are < 0.90 and 0.85 (**Table 4**).

Similarly, coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect size (f^2) is also used as a measure to assess the model fitness. It was observed that effect size is good and acceptable i.e., >0.01 (Hair et al., 2006; Bashir et al., 2020). In terms of coefficient of determination, it was observed that value consonance, teachers 'self-efficacy, and belongingness are explaining the 56% change in employee-based brand equity (**Figure 2** illustrates the percentage of change). Similarly, 9% change is being observed in teacher self-efficacy due to value consonance, and 12% change is being observed in belongingness due to value consonance, thus, the coefficient of determination is satisfactory (Hair et al., 2017). While predictive relevance has been tested based onQ^2 (Geisser, 1975), which is found satisfactory (greater than zero).

Hypotheses Testing

Finally, hypothesis testing has been done based on structural model evaluation/assessment. In this regard, *p* and *t* statistics have been evaluated while the mediation hypothesis has been tested based on the significance of indirect paths. **Table 5** illustrates hypotheses testing. The first hypothesis of this study is related to the relationship of VC → EBBE (H1). Path estimates of this relationship indicates that one unit change in value consonance will bring a 0.265 unit change in employee-based brand equity. Both p and t statistics for this path are within the acceptable range (t > 1.96 and $p < 0.05$). This state of affairs indicates that the impact of value consonance on employee-based brand equity is positive and insignificant, hence H1 is supported. Similarly, the second hypothesis of this study is related to the relationship between VC → TSE (H2). Path estimates of this relationship indicates that one unit change in value consonance will bring a 0.300 unit change in teachers' self-efficacy. Both p and t statistics for this path are within the acceptable range (t > 1.96 and $p < 0.05$). This state of affairs indicates that the impact of value consonance on self-efficacy is positive and insignificant and this state of affairs indicates that H2 is supported. The third hypothesis of this study is related to the relationship of VC → Belongingness (H3). Path estimates of this relationship indicates that one unit change in value consonance will bring a 0.345 unit change in teacher's belongingness. Both p and t statistics for this path are within the

TABLE 2 | Reliability and convergent validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Indicator	BL	VIF	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	AVE
BL	BL1	0.725	1.346	0.744	0.774	0.853	0.660
	BL2	0.845	1.678				
	BL3	0.861	1.575				
EBBE	EBBE1	0.762	1.207	0.737	0.761	0.826	0.543
	EBBE2	0.675	2.052				
	EBBE3	0.756	1.401				
	EBBE5	0.750	2.308				
TSE	TSE1	0.774	2.090	0.924	0.939	0.936	0.598
	TSE12	0.771	3.980				
	TSE2	0.891	4.605				
	TSE3	0.787	3.512				
	TSE4	0.617	1.535				
	TSE5	0.850	3.159				
	TSE6	0.682	1.802				
	TSE7	0.824	5.047				
	TSE8	0.768	3.428				
	TSE9	0.731	1.961				
VC	VC1	0.922	2.487	0.855	0.939	0.908	0.769
	VC2	0.929	3.158				
	VC3	0.770	1.816				

VC, Value consonance; EBBE, Employee based brand equity; TSE, Teacher self-efficacy; BL, Belongingness.

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Construct	BL	EBBE	TSE	VC
BL	-	-	-	-
EBBE	0.588	-	-	-
TSE	0.344	0.668	-	-
VC	0.419	0.596	0.312	-

VC, Value consonance; EBBE, Employee based brand equity; TSE, Teacher self-efficacy; BL, Belongingness.

TABLE 4 | Direct, indirect, and total path estimates.

	Beta	SD	t	p
Direct path				
BL -> EBBE	0.197	0.052	3.758	0.000
TSE -> EBBE	0.528	0.041	12.873	0.000
VC -> BL	0.345	0.047	7.293	0.000
VC -> EBBE	0.265	0.040	6.649	0.000
VC -> TSE	0.300	0.055	5.495	0.000
Indirect path				
VC -> TSE -> EBBE	0.158	0.028	5.725	0.000
VC -> BL -> EBBE	0.068	0.023	2.970	0.003
Total path				
VC -> EBBE	0.491	0.042	11.797	0.000

VC, Value consonance; EBBE, Employee based brand equity; TSE, Teacher self-efficacy; BL, Belongingness.

acceptable range ($t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$). This state of affairs indicates that the impact of value consonance on belongingness is positive and insignificant. Thus, H3 is supported. While testing for mediation, indirect effects have been evaluated. In this regard H4 related to VC→TSE→EBBE has been evaluated based on indirect effect, which is significant, and it can be implied that value consonance promotes teacher self-efficacy, which further shapes positive behavior in terms of employee-based brand equity. Thus, H4 is accepted. Similarly, H5 is related to VC → BL → EBBE. This indirect path is evaluated based on the significant indirect effect and it can be implied that value consonance promotes belongingness which further shapes positive behavior in terms of employee-based brand equity. Thus, H5 is accepted.

DISCUSSION

This research was conducted to explore the possible relationships which were not taken into consideration before. The direct relationships of teachers' value consonance were tested with employee-based brand equity, teachers' self-efficacy, and belongingness. The indirect relationships between teachers' self-efficacy and belongingness were also tested in this research between teachers' value consonance and employee-based brand equity. The results proved the worth of studying these relationships in this context of brand equity which was not much explored before in higher educational institutes. The first hypothesis was about checking the association of teachers' value consonance with employee-based brand equity, and it was accepted indicating that there was a significant association of teachers' value consonance with employee-based brand equity.

TABLE 5 | Hypotheses testing.

	Coefficient (Beta)	S.D	t	p	Status
Direct hypotheses					
H1 VC → EBBE	0.265	0.040	6.649	0.000	Supported
H2 VC → TSE	0.300	0.055	5.495	0.000	Supported
H3 VC → BL	0.345	0.047	7.293	0.000	Supported
Mediation hypotheses					
H4 VC → TSE → EBBE	0.158	0.028	5.725	0.000	Supported
H5 VC → BL → EBBE	0.068	0.023	2.970	0.003	Supported

VC, Value consonance; EBBE, Employee based brand equity; TSE, Teacher self-efficacy; BL, Belongingness.

This result proved that when teachers got congruence between their own beliefs and institutional values then it could lead to developing a sense of ownership for the institute. This kind of ownership develops a sense of working hard for the betterment of the organization. This betterment ultimately leads to developing the brand image of the institute. This brand image is the goal of based brand equity in which teachers and other employees work for the internal branding which ultimately attracts the customers which are the students in the context of educational institutes. This result is also supported by the fact that branding has taken on new dimensions, and as a result of its competitive character, it has become the most in-demand commodity in businesses (Urde, 2016). According to some authors (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004), branding is more about people than it is about objects or commodities, and in this case, involved people are the students and teachers.

Furthermore, branding was originally used to distinguish between services and things, but it has since expanded to be linked to persons, helping businesses to stand out from their competition. After going deep into the concept of branding, internal branding is the next target of the organizations which is a multi-faceted strategy for promoting an organization's brand among its employees (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Aurand et al., 2005; Biswas) which are teachers and administration in this study. Similar results were obtained for the direct relationship of teachers' value consonance with teachers' self-efficacy and belongingness. These hypotheses were also accepted indicating that the shared values of teachers with their institutes develop a sense of belongingness in them along with helping them in becoming more self-efficacious.

These results could be interpreted in the understanding of the value of consonance. Before going into value consonance, one should be aware of values. Personal values related to one's interests are important factors in providing inspiration and making decisions (Schwartz). A recent study discovered that how one's principles align with the perceived values promoted by one's company has an impact on one's professional wellbeing and perseverance (Cable and Edwards, 2004). Therefore, teachers' value consonance is very important in developing self-efficacy and a sense of belongingness in them. These findings could be seen as demonstrating the importance of value concordance for teachers and that education processes cannot be limited to a technical aspect only.

We argue that instruction entails the transmission and embodiment of values, and most teachers are motivated by objectives and principles which are difficult to compromise since their activity at work entails more than just education and professional skill development. As a result, most teachers are obliged to have aims and values that are consistent with the institution's goals and values. Although this study cannot draw causal conclusions, one interesting assumption which should be examined in longitudinal studies is that value consonance promotes instructors' self-efficacy and belongingness. The mediating roles of teachers' self-efficacy and belongingness were also evaluated in this research and proved that these could mediate the relationship of teachers' value consonance in developing employee-based brand equity.

The results indicated that both teachers' self-efficacy and belongingness that fully mediated the relationship and attention toward the future would help develop based brand equity in the educational institutes. Previously, it is considered that teachers' self-efficacy is a component of social cognition theory and has been widely investigated in a range of disciplines and settings, and it has been backed up by a large body of data from several domains (Fryer et al., 2021). Due to teachers' value concordance, this study affirms teacher self-efficacy as an important psychological condition that positively impacts employee-based brand equity. The findings support Liu and Hallinger's (2018) assertion that Chinese teachers' strong teaching efficacy contributes to high levels of teacher professional learning.

It shows that teachers' self-efficacy plays an important role in strengthening the benefits of value congruence in the creation of employee-based brand equity at educational institutions where they work. Previously, it was also assumed that belongingness is a central facet of motivation and placed as a pivotal factor in the hierarchy of motivation in many studies (Debreli and Ishanova, 2019). Due to its pivotal role, it aided in the relationship of value consonance with the development of employee-based brand equity. Some of the scholars (Shaterian Mohamadi and Asadzadeh, 2011; Saroughi and Cheema, 2022) also evaluated the mediating roles of teachers' self-efficacy and sense of belonging in different contexts. This research also approved some results (Etehadi and Karatepe, 2019), which supported the mediating role of self-efficacy from a different perspective.

CONCLUSION

Based on the empirical findings of this, study it can be concluded that value consonance can promote positive behaviors in the workplace. When employees feel that they share the most prevalent norms at their academic institutes, it promotes their self-efficacy. Moreover, it can also be concluded that teachers with high self-efficacy can develop based on brand equity. Similarly, based on empirical findings of this study, it can also be drawn that those employees with high-value consonance develop a sense of belongingness with their academic institutes. Further, it can also be drawn that those teachers with high self-efficacy develop

self-efficacy which further promotes their positive behavior in the shape of employee-based brand equity.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical perspective, this study is the first one that has tested the impact of value consonance on employee-based brand equity which is the unique contribution of this study. This study endorses the premise of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) and supports the argument that self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by four sources of information, thus, we believe that value consonance becomes a source of information for teachers and they develop self-efficacy which further triggers them to shape their positive behaviors in terms of employee-based brand equity. From a practical point of view, this study posits that academic institutes should focus on building value-based cultures so that teachers could develop a sense of consonance, enabling them to develop positive behaviors in the shape of based brand equity. Moreover, such practices can promote belongingness among teachers, and they can show positive behaviors in the workplace.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has also some limitations just like other cross-sectional studies. Thus, due to its cross-sectional nature, we cannot draw a causal relationship, so future longitudinal studies should be conducted to draw the causal inference. The sample size in this study is not large enough, so in future studies, a large sample size is considered to get deeper insights. This study has considered teachers' self-efficacy as a mediating variable to predicted employee-based brand equity, while in the future, other phenomena, such as collective self-efficacy and teacher engagement, can also be taken as mediating variables. Similarly, in future studies, dimensions of employee-based brand equity, such as brand allegiance and brand endorsement, could also be tested separately. Moreover, in future studies, belief-driven favoritism and conflict can also be accounted for, while the prevalence of ethical leadership and servant leadership can also be tested as a moderating mechanism in future studies.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

XY drafted initial file. AH collected data. YK ran analysis file. NQ revised and proof read the file. TK and WW corrected and finalized the file. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Teacher's Emotional Intelligence and Employee Brand-Based Equity: Mediating Role of Teaching Performance and Teacher's Self-Efficacy

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Educational institutions need to respond to global competitive problems, and branding has become a method for higher education institutions to differentiate themselves. Thus, this study attempted to investigate predictors of employee brand-based equity. A cross-sectional research design has been used to record the perception of the teachers, and data are collected using a convenience sampling technique. Before administrating the study on large scale, a pilot testing was conducted, and reliability of the scale and their items was ensured. Pilot testing results indicated a satisfactory reliability level, and constructs correlations were in the assumed directions, which allowed to conduct the study on a large scale. A sample size of 400 was set, and questionnaires were distributed among the participants, out of which, 376 were received back, while 351 were left at the end after discarding incomplete responses. The left over and completed questionnaires indicate 88% response rate. Data have been analyzed through the Smart PLS software by applying the structural equation modeling technique. After establishment of the measurement model through reliability and validity, the structural model was used to test study hypotheses. All the study hypotheses were found statistically significant on the basis of t and p statistics. Results indicate that teacher's emotional intelligence enhances teachers' self-efficacy, which further improves their brand-based equity. Similarly, emotional intelligence increases teacher's performance, which also increases their brand-based equity. Limitations and future directions of the study are also reported.

Keywords: teachers emotional intelligence, employee brand based equity, teaching performance, teacher's self-efficacy, teacher – education

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INTRODUCTION

Due to escalating competitiveness in many sectors, the themes of marketing including brand equity have gotten a lot of attention throughout the years. The actual worth of a successful brand is its capacity to capture consumer brand preference (Pinar et al., 2011) since brands reflect consumer feelings and perceptions about a brand (or service) and its performance. Furthermore,

well-developed and maintained brands represent invaluable attributes and resources for businesses (Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 2004). This is due to the fact that strong brands may help businesses acquire a competitive edge (Chaharbaghi and Lynch, 1999; Kor and Mahoney, 2005) by being unique and difficult to replicate, as well as improving their financial success (Kim et al., 2003; Ponsonby-Mccabe and Boyle, 2006).

For continuous demand and prosperity, brands should maintain their promises, generate trust, and ultimately build customer loyalty, as great brands contribute significantly to a company's performance (Sozuer et al., 2020; Boukis et al., 2021). Among the most valuable assets for businesses is brand equity, which is a vital topic for management scholars (Christodoulides et al., 2015). "The combination of financial assets associated to a brand, company name, and logo that contribute or denounce from the value supplied by a commodity or service to a firm and/or that firm's clients" (Kumar and Rekhi, 2018). Faced with internal and overseas competitiveness, higher education administrations have discovered that traditional or external branding initiatives are insufficient to develop strong institutional brands, as the majority of these activities appear to be centered on marketing and identification.

As a result, educational institutions began to build stronger brand strategies to respond to global competitive problems, and branding has become a method for higher education institutions to differentiate themselves (Jevons, 2006; Bunzel, 2007; Whisman, 2009). In contrast, Hemsley-Brown et al. (2016) argued that more studies are needed to gain a better knowledge of the competition and how to take advantage of the opportunities that globalization presents. Furthermore, according to Nguyen et al. (2016), a brand represents the institute's ability to meet student demands, builds trust in its ability to supply the essential services, and aids prospective students in making the best educational and course choices. Empirical research demonstrates that, if effective, a higher education branding strategy could improve services while also attracting and retaining students (Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013; Sultan and Wong, 2014).

Since an educational institute is a jumble of people and processes, it is difficult to discuss them apart. Current findings have deepened our awareness of the brand in the higher education context by looking into numerous challenges linked to educational institute branding (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Marketing strategy has evolved into a science of branding in which both existing and future employees are targeted to achieve the corporate image promise through the promotion of a distinctive blend of direct and indirect attributes. These are work and organizational characteristics that must be unique in order for a company to obtain a competitive edge, such as employment opportunities or compensation systems (Theurer et al., 2016). All of these lead to the development of employee-based brand equity (EBBE) which is supposed to be the next new target of higher educational institutes in branding.

According to previous studies, educating competent teaching personnel could increase educational standards. The teaching faculty at the university level is required to be dedicated to their work and take initiative. Education is widely acknowledged as the most important factor in a country's moral, ideological, social, and economic progress. In the past two decades, countries that took big steps forward have made revolutionary achievements and performed miracles (Usarov, 2019; König et al., 2020). According to a previous study, the higher education system, particularly teachers, brings about qualitative change and enhances educational standards, guaranteeing the wellbeing, development, and growth of a country. Teachers should prepare professionally for this aim, and they must acquire capabilities at teacher training institutions (Anwer and Hussain, 2020).

For decades, organizational scientists have been trying to work out how to make a teacher successful. This intriguing subject has been studied using a variety of tactics and research methods, yet it remains unresolved. Therefore, studying teacher abilities appears to be one interesting line of inquiry that has the ability to provide answers or at the very least shed some light on the organization's dilemma (Naderi Anari, 2012). Teacher skills are the channels through which teacher's method, teacher's practice, teacher's approach, teacher's personal qualities and teacher's style are delivered to students to achieve effective outcomes in organizations (Gómez-Betancourt et al., 2014). All these skills are linked with emotional intelligence (EI) of the teachers, therefore, an increasing corpus of research on the role of EI for effective teachers has emerged in the past decade or two.

The belief that persons having higher levels of EI capabilities are more likely to succeed in the workplace than people who are less emotionally intelligent is at the heart of this research. Researchers have noticed that social skills are particularly important for instructors; as people move up the organizational ladder, social intelligence has become a more important factor in who will and will not succeed (Turner and Baker, 2018; Shao, 2019). Since the little investigation has been performed in an educational institutes' context, as Kotsou et al. (2018) indicated, more solid research is needed to support the use of EI informal organizations, whether governmental or commercial, on both individual and organizational levels.

To the best of researcher's knowledge, no research has looked into the link between EI and EBBE in the context of educational institutions. What factors contribute to a teacher's success in the classroom? There have been a lot of answers to this question; therefore, this question has gotten a lot of attention. Conventional indicators of competence, such as accreditation, describe less about performance, and previous attempts to enhance our understanding have generated "equivocal findings" (Rivkin et al., 2005; Klassen and Tze, 2014). Having a thorough understanding, which leads to successful teacher instruction, can influence teacher recruitment and training, as well as student performance (Corcoran, 2018). This research would keenly contribute in finding the routes for development of EBBE in educational contexts. In this way, branding strategies in higher education would also improve the level of services for students (Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013; Sultan and Wong, 2014).

Based on the findings of Wu et al. (2018), it is assumed that teaching performance is not only an indicator of a teacher's EI, but it could also help in developing brand equity among the teachers. Similarly, teachers' self-efficacy could also help in developing brand equity among the teachers. To fill the gaps in previous studies, which only focused on teachers' EI leading to

their self-efficacy and performance (Wu et al., 2018), we proposed to find the role of teachers' EI in creating employee-based brand equity in educational institutes. This research dealt with certain objectives of finding possible association between teachers' EI and EBBE. Along with that, the author also tried to figure out the mediating roles of teaching performance and teachers' self-efficacy toward the development of employee-based brand equity.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

Emotional intelligence has been supported by implicit theories. Individuals usually act in accordance with these theories, which act as knowledge structures by which individuals perceive themselves and others (Chiu et al., 1997; Plaks et al., 2009). As a result, implicit theories have a major impact on human behavior, and studying natural diversity within these ideas may aid in predicting how people would react to specific stimuli, therapies, or behavioral coaching. People may, for instance, hold various implicit theories about the adaptability of different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral realms of human nature (Leith et al., 2014). Intellect, emotion, interpersonal skills, relations, management skills, social judgment, and stereotyping are all examples of these realms.

Such domains are regarded as fairly constant and complicated to change by the so-called entity sociologists. In contrast, incremental scholars see these kinds of qualities as mutable and adaptable over effort and time (Costa and Faria, 2018). Implicit intelligence theories appear to play a substantial role in behaviors and psychology of humans. People who believe in progressive theories of intelligence perceive the effort as beneficial and essential for growing ability, and they are more likely to set learning goals focused on developing their adaptable features. They are more persistent and strategic than those who believe in entity theories of intelligence, so they are more likely to create performance techniques to deal with genetic defects like puberty and the transfer from elementary to middle school (Mangels et al., 2006; Blackwell et al., 2007; Nussbaum and Dweck, 2008).

Human psychology and behavior are also heavily influenced by implicit theories of emotions. Numerous investigations with university graduates or grown-ups have found that all those who hold incremental theories about the malleability of emotions are more likely to use cognitive strategies as an emotional regulation strategy, experience more positive and fewer negative emotions, have more support networks, are more likely to use performance strategies rather than helpless strategies, and also have greater aspiration than those who hold entity theories (Burnette et al., 2012; De Castella et al., 2013). Implicit theories of emotions and intelligence are interrelated but independent; certain emotional and academic results are influenced by these, whereas others are influenced by just one.

Furthermore, numerous investigations with university graduates imply that overall emotions are more flexible than intelligence in their perspective. This is uncertain whether age and gender have an impact on implicit notions about intelligence and emotions. Several studies investigated substantial differences between women and men, while a meta-analysis produced ambiguous results (Tamir et al., 2007; Doron et al., 2009; Romero et al., 2014). This study got support from these implicit theories for evaluation of the role of EI in developing employee-based brand equity. Bandura's (1999) interpersonal theories of self-efficacy and cognitive ability are the foundations of teachers' self-efficacy.

Regarding social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is a critical component of human agency that "operates in harmony with other characteristics in the concept to regulate human consciousness, desire, and activity." Both are essential for efficient operation, Bandura said that self-efficacy seems to be the essential element of human agency, the practice of self-control, and accomplishment. Believing that someone can achieve activities outside of his capability is unlikely to make it, yet, if people do not think that they own the personal potential of generating results, they will not try, regardless of if they have the potential (Bandura, 1999). So, this study also gets support from the self-efficacy theory of Bandura.

Teachers' Emotional Intelligence and Employee-Based Brand Equity

People are appraised in the job based on their perceived or actual level of intelligence. In truth, a recruiter has long used intellect as a criterion when evaluating potential candidates. Although this appears to be logical, research indicates that there are additional factors to consider when recruiting great leaders and staff. Thorndike (1920) claimed that social intelligence and the capacity to get along with everyone else are extremely important for both professional and personal interactions. EI is focused on the capacity to detect one's personal emotions, discern and classify others' emotions, control emotions, and adapt and respond to the environment, as well as how people work together and do business tasks. Businesses have outperformed their opponents as a result of their ability to do so.

According to Goleman (1995), a top leader's ability is to comprehend and employ EI accounts for approximately 85% of their success. If this is accurate on an interpersonal basis, organizations that nurture and use EI have a better chance of outperforming all those who do not (Goleman, 1995; Perloff, 1997). Whenever a teacher strives to control his emotions, he frequently succeeds in changing his own and others' moods by implementing coping mechanisms that concentrate on emotion modification or resolving issues (Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal, 2008). Studies demonstrate that levels of teacher EI scores cope with unpleasant situations more constructively and are more inclined to seek positive solutions; also, teachers' positive self-assessment in EI is linked to efficacy beliefs in reacting to students and administering the classrooms (Perry and Ball, 2007).

According to certain studies, teachers with a higher level of academic training (e.g., a doctorate) are the ones who pay the greatest attention to their students' emotions (Soanes and Sungoh, 2019). Lee and Mamerow (2019) supported these findings, stating that individuals with greater academic qualifications also have higher values for the capacity "management of emotions in groups," followed by those

with a bachelor's degree and then those with a master's degree. Previously, the impact of EI of teachers has not been studied on employee-based brand equity, but it has a lot to offer as teachers are the employees of the educational institutes, and such institutes are turning into brands. It is also understood that teachers create value for their institutions (Mourad et al., 2011); therefore, we assumed that such value-creating could lead to developing brand equity in their respective institutions. We further assumed that the EI of the teachers could lead to employee-based brand equity; therefore, we suggested the following hypothesis:

> ***H***$_1$*: Teacher emotional intelligence is positively related to employee brand-based equity.*

Teachers' Emotional Intelligence, Teachers' Self-Efficacy, and Teachers' Performance

One aspect that may affect teachers' self-efficacy is EI, which measures an individual's capacity to comprehend and regulate their emotions, as well as sympathize with and respond properly to the emotions of others (Valente et al., 2019). When assessing their level of self-efficacy, teachers look at their own teaching abilities (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Sutton and Wheatley, 2003). Teaching competency varies depending on the teaching activity; however, all teaching tasks require the ability to work with emotion. Teachers must regulate, evaluate, and manage their emotions in order to achieve pedagogical efficacy and create a happy learning environment (Gates, 2000). Therefore, regardless of the teaching task, teachers are likely to include their EI when assessing their level of self-efficacy (Wu et al., 2018).

Emotional intelligence is strongly connected with instructors' sense of self-efficacy, according to empirical findings. EI components may also influence teachers' self-efficacy (Sarkhosh and Rezaee, 2014). Chan (2004) discovered that secondary school teachers in Hong Kong's empathic sensitivity predicted self-efficacy toward assisting others, and also that positive emotion control impacted overall self-efficacy. Social and emotional competence, as per the prosocial classroom approach, can assist instructors in achieving good performance. Teachers with a high level of social and emotional competence, in particular, are better at using emotions and verbal assistance to encourage students' passion for learning and to lead and manage student behavior (Chan, 2004).

Furthermore, these teachers have a better awareness of the mechanisms of instructional situations of conflict, resulting in a significant reduction in disruptive behavior. Teachers having greater EI seem to have superior teaching performance, according to the empirical data (Yoke and Panatik, 2015). In conclusion, past research has shown that EI has an impact on teaching performance and is linked to teachers' self-efficacy perceptions. EI, according to Sarkhosh and Rezaee (2014), improves teachers' performance accomplishment, which in turn contributes to better self-efficacy (Wu et al., 2018). As a result, we looked into the relationships between EI, instructional effectiveness, and instructors' self-efficacy. We hypothesized that because instructors with higher EI have better teachers' performance, their confidence and self-efficacy will be shaped by this:

> ***H***$_2$*: Teacher emotional intelligence is positively related to employee teacher's self-efficacy.*

> ***H***$_3$*: Teacher emotional intelligence is positively related to teaching performance.*

Mediating Role of Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Teaching Performance

The essential characteristics of human freedom expressed as effort and perseverance devoted to the achievement of the goals are captured by a people's self-efficacy, which functions as an intrapersonal incentive factor. Teachers' self-efficacy was being demonstrated to affect their teaching techniques, passion, dedication, and teaching behaviors, as well as their tenacity in dealing with problematic learners (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2007). However, no motivating component has unchanging impacts, including situational circumstances, tools to generate validity, and self-appraisal precision all influence self-efficacy (Bandura, 2011).

Emotional intelligence is positively correlated with or anticipates teachers' self-efficacy. Fabio and Palazzeschi (2008) employed a multiple regression model to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy and EI in an Italian teacher's research. Increased EI was found to be linked to higher self-efficacy in three different categories (i.e., educational approaches, student participation, and classroom organization). Furthermore, the intrapersonal dimension of EI was found to be a superior predictor of all three dimensions of instructors' self-efficacy (Alrajhi et al., 2017). A lot of investigations indicated that EI proved to be the predictor of teachers' self-efficacy (Yazici et al., 2011; Gharetepeh et al., 2015; Black et al., 2019; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2019; Valente et al., 2020).

A few researchers also evaluated the mediating role of teachers' self-efficacy in various contexts (Shaterian Mohamadi and Asadzadeh, 2011; Kunemund et al., 2020). These findings suggested that teachers' self-efficacy could be utilized as a mediator between teachers' EI and EBBE in this research. Inputs, procedures, and outputs can be used to evaluate a teacher's performance. Most of the studies on "teacher performance" provide a sense of direction or the instructor's impact on student accomplishment. Although it is possible that the best way to assess teacher performance is to look at increases in a diverse selection of student learning, such as academic and social outcomes, it is also possible that the best way to assess teacher performance is to look at increases in a variety of different types of student learning (Corcoran and Tormey, 2013).

Emotional intelligence is thought to be the foundation for emotionally smart and interpersonally suitable teaching approaches (Corcoran and Tormey, 2013). Furthermore, we are currently unaware of any scientific findings that would allow us to determine if greater amounts of assessed EI are linked to more successful teacher performance in establishing the EBBE. In reality, among working teachers, there is very less data on EI (Corcoran and Tormey, 2013). A few researchers recently

evaluated the impact of EI on teaching performance (Wahyudi, 2018; Kaur et al., 2019; Akhtar et al., 2020), but they did not check their impacts on EBBE. A few also evaluated the mediating role of teaching performance between EI and teachers' self-efficacy (Wu et al., 2018). This literature about the interconnectedness of EI with teachers' self-efficacy and teaching performance allowed us to suggest the following hypotheses:

> ***H***$_4$*: Teacher's self-efficacy mediates the relationship of teacher emotional intelligence and employee brand-based equity.*
>
> ***H***$_5$*: Teaching performance mediates the relationship of teacher emotional intelligence and employee brand-based equity.*

The conceptual model (**Figure 1**) has been formed based on the above literature and hypotheses.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

This study used a cross-sectional research design to record the perception of the teachers. In the past studies, the usage of cross-sectional research design is common and prevalent (Wu et al., 2018); thus, this study has utilized this research design. We have used the survey research method, and data are collected using a convenience sampling technique. A convenience sampling technique comes under the domain of non-probability sampling technique, and its application in survey-based research is common, and previous researchers have used it frequently (Ali et al., 2015; Saqib et al., 2017). A convenience sampling technique provides an ease and access in terms of cost and time in data collection. Hence, perception of teachers was obtained in this study through this sampling technique. In the past, other studies have also used teachers as target population in previous studies (e.g., Abun, 2021).

In this regard, administration of the academic institutes was requested to accord formal approval to collect data from the teaching staff. After getting prior approval from the administration, a list of faculty members along with their contact details was obtained, and later, teaching staff was approached for data collection on the basis of available contact lists. They were briefed about the study and its intended outcomes. Moreover, written informed consent was obtained from the participants. Before administrating study on a large scale, a pilot testing was conducted, and reliability of the scales and their items was ensured. Pilot testing results indicated a satisfactory reliability level, and constructs correlations were in the assumed directions, which allowed us to move forward for large-scale data collection.

A reasonable and suitable sample size was devised based on the recommendations of available literature (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970) and previously used by Bashir et al. (2019, 2020) and Wu et al. (2022). Keeping in view the recommendations, a sample size of 384 was sufficient; hence, we set a benchmark of 400 as sample size and floated questionnaire among the teaching staff of academic institutes. Out of these 400 distributed questionnaires, 376 were received back. After discarding the incomplete responses, the useable questionnaires were left as 351, which have been used for the data analysis purpose. Thus, the response rate remained at 88%, which is sufficient in cross-sectional survey-based research.

Issues of common method bias can shatter the results in cross-sectional research; thus, we employed various techniques to address this issue; first, we used reverse-coded questions/scale items to restrict respondents from providing monotonic responses. Second, we have interchanged the position of variables in the questionnaires, so that respondents could not develop a correlation. Finally, we ensured respondents that collected data will be used only for academic purpose, and their feedback will be strictly kept under confidentiality (Bashir et al., 2019, 2020).

First part of the questionnaire was related to the demographic features of the teaching staff related to their age, gender, and teaching experience along with their academic qualification. Demographic statistics indicate that majority of the respondents have 18 years of education, while respondents having age above 25 years occupy major composition in the participants. Similarly, almost equal number of respondents were single (48%) and married (52%) with minor differences in proportion. Similar patterns were observed in case of gender, and male and female teaching staff was almost equally distributed in sample respondents.

Scales/Measurement

We have used a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 5–1), where 5 indicates a situation of strongly agree and 1 indicates a situation of strongly disagree. The independent variable (teachers' EI) of this study is operationalized on the basis of 15-item Teachers' Emotional Competence Scale (Wu et al., 2018). The original version of this scale consists of six dimensions and total of twenty four items. However, we have conceptualized most relevant dimensions of this scale and adapted fifteen items from this scale, covering the dimensions of self-emotion awareness (SEA) with four items, self-emotion regulation (SER) with four items, students' emotion identification (SEI) with four items, and students' emotion management (STEM) with three items. Sample items for this scale includes, "I do not pay much attention to students emotions in class" (reverse coded) and "I have the ability to influence students' emotions."

Similarly, a mediating variable, teaching performance was measured on the basis of four items previously used by Corcoran and Tormey (2013) and Wu et al. (2018). Sample items include, "I seriously monitor students in class to prevent disruptive behavior," and we have used one dimension of this scale relevant to our conceptualization. The other mediating variable of this study, i.e., teacher's self-efficacy is the measure on the basis of scale developed by Yu et al. (1995) through the Teachers' Sense of Teaching Efficacy Scale (TSTES). The sample item for this scale includes, "I can change students with learning disabilities if I work hard." We have conceptualized the personal teaching efficacy (PTE) dimension of this scale. Finally, EBBE is measured on the basis of five items of Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010). Sample statement of this scale includes, "I am aware that everything I say or do can affect the brand image." We have used

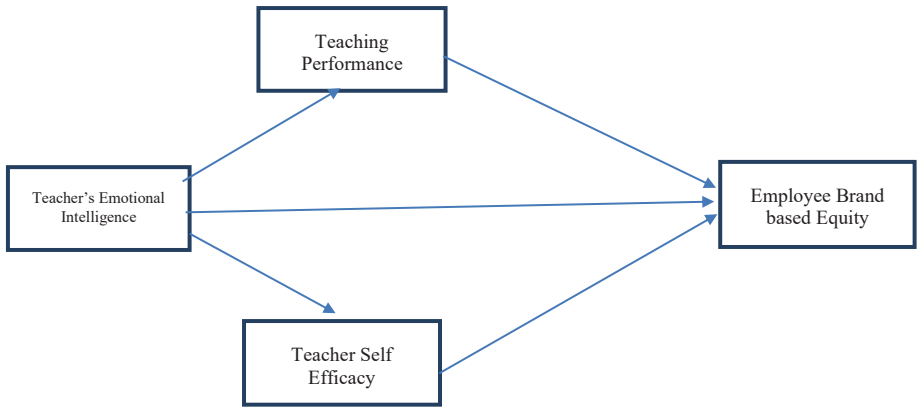

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

reverse-coded items in the scale to restrict the respondents from providing monotonic responses.

RESULTS

Assessment of Measurement and Structural Model

We have opted a multivariate data analysis tool to test the hypothesized relationships of this study. For this purpose, structural equation modeling (SEM) is performed using Smart PLS 3.9 (Ali et al., 2018; Bashir et al., 2020). Owing to several reasons, we have used Smart PLS; it is highly comfortable with complicated models and can handle tiny samples quickly (Hair et al., 2016). Furthermore, it has the capacity to handle non-normal data with ease, and non-parametric data are simply handled, and finally, it can be used where theory is less developed. The conceptualized model of this study is termed as where theory pertaining to EBBE is less developed. So, based on these issues, the usage of Smart PLS was a good available option. SEM is evaluated in two ways, i.e., one for measurement model evaluation and the other for structural model evaluation (Hair et al., 2019).

The measuring model was evaluated for its reliability and validity. For this purpose, alpha, rho-a, and composite reliability (CR) were assessed, and it was observed that all the indicators of reliability are above the threshold value, i.e., >0.60. These indicators are indicating a good level of reliability. In this regard, the value of alpha for EBBE was 0.744, and the highest value of alpha was observed for the construct teachers' EI, i.e., 0.931 (Hair et al., 2011; Bashir et al., 2020). Other parameters of reliability, i.e., rho-A and composite reliability were also within the acceptable limit.

To test the convergent validity, we have used two measures, namely, one is average variance extracted (AVE) and second is outer loadings. Results indicate that AVE of the respective constructs was above the requited limit of 0.50, which indicates that convergent validity has been established (Mela and Kopalle, 2002).

In case of outer loadings (**Figures 2**, **3**, and **Table 1**), the values of the outer loadings were within the acceptable limits, i.e., >0.708; however, some values were observed low as compared with the benchmark. Values less than 0.40 were dropped from further analysis; however, some values with lower outer loadings have been retained in this study because AVE of the respective construct was within the acceptable range (>0.50). In this regard, one item in EBBE has lower overloading, while two items from teacher's EI and one item from teacher performance have lower outer loadings. However, the AVE of the respective construct was higher than the limit. While talking about the droppage of items from construct, one item has been dropped from EBBE (EBBE-3) and one item from teachers' self-efficacy (TSE-2) has also been dropped. No item has been dropped from teacher's performance, while four items have been dropped from teacher's EI scale (i.e., TEI-3, TEI-10, TEI-11, and TEI-15) due to very low outer loadings.

We have used very well-established criteria to assess discriminant validity (**Table 2**), i.e., HTMT ratios (Hair et al., 2016). Two tables, **Table 3** (Fornell and Larcker criteria) and **Table 4** (HTMT ratios), in this regard indicate establishment of discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE of variables is larger than the correlations among them, according to the first condition (Hair et al., 2011), which offsets the first criteria and establishes discriminant validity.

Similarly, another way for evaluating discriminant validity has been used as assessment of HTMT. As long as the HTMT ratios in all columns are less than 0.90 and 0.85, both liberal and conservative HTMT benchmarks have been met (**Table 4**).

In addition to these measures, we have used other established criteria to test the model fitness, i.e., coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect size (f^2). The effect size was found to be good and acceptable, i.e., larger than 0.01 (Hair et al., 2006; Bashir et al., 2020). While in case of coefficient of determination, it can be said that good effect size has been observed; first, **Figure 2** illustrates that 8% change in teacher's self-efficacy is being observed through teachers' EI, while 11% change is being observed in teaching performance through teacher's EI (**Figure 2**). Predictor and mediating variables (both) collectively explain 56% change in

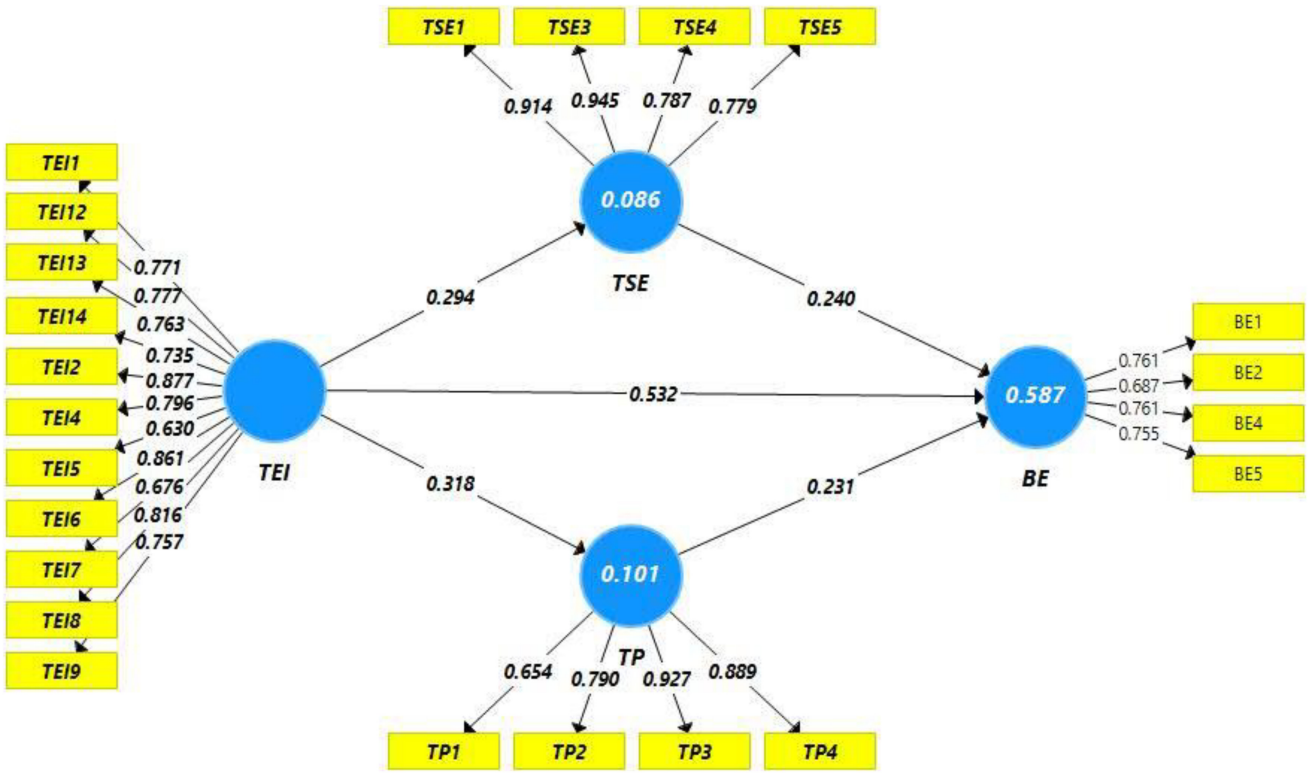

FIGURE 2 | Path estimates.

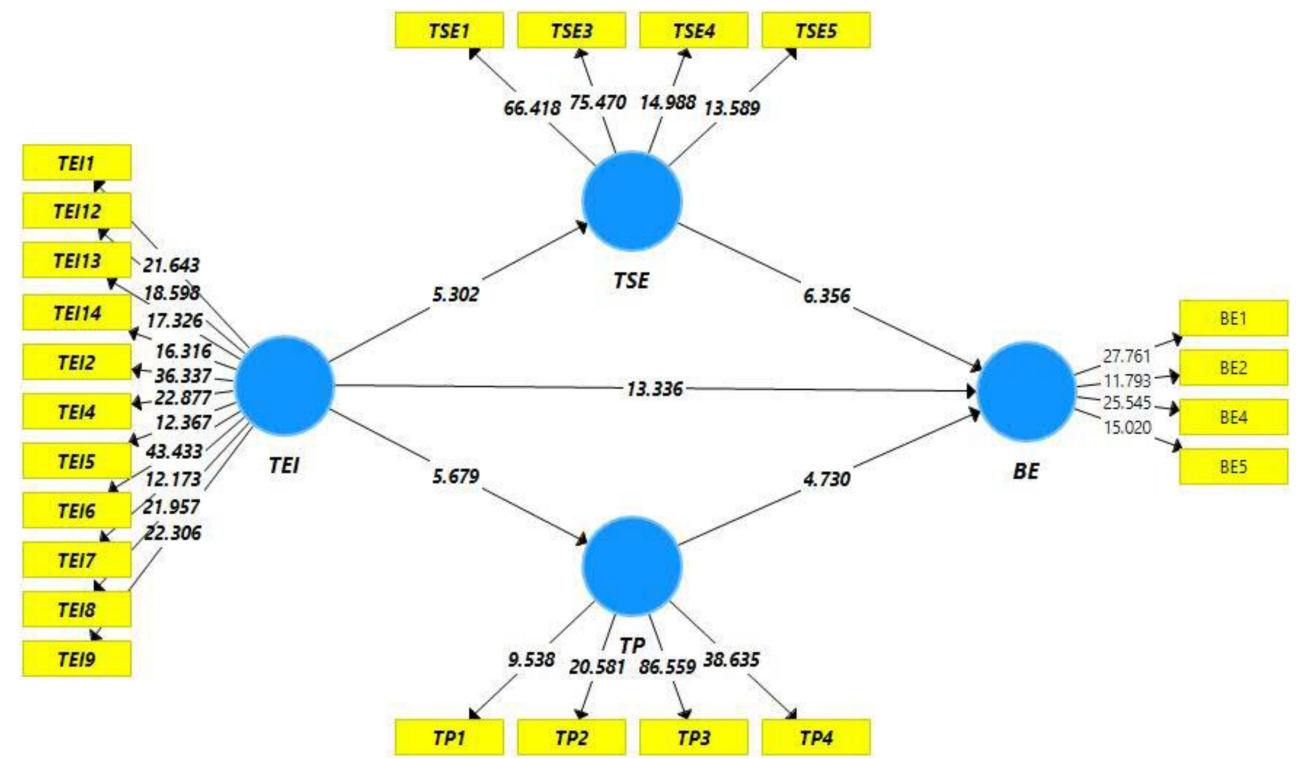

FIGURE 3 | Path significance.

TABLE 1 | Reliability and convergent validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Indicator	FL	VIF	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	AVE
EBBE	BE1	0.761	1.215	0.744	0.767	0.830	0.550
	BE2	0.687	2.070				
	BE4	0.761	1.419				
	BE5	0.755	2.327				
TEI	TEI1	0.771	2.118	0.931	0.940	0.942	0.596
	TEI12	0.777	3.580				
	TEI13	0.763	3.792				
	TEI14	0.735	3.203				
	TEI2	0.877	4.673				
	TEI4	0.796	3.636				
	TEI5	0.630	1.545				
	TEI6	0.861	3.567				
	TEI7	0.676	1.809				
	TEI8	0.816	4.869				
	TEI9	0.757	3.424				
TP	TP1	0.654	1.381	0.835	0.869	0.891	0.675
	TP2	0.790	1.774				
	TP3	0.927	5.525				
	TP4	0.889	4.756				
TSE	TSE1	0.914	2.856	0.884	0.975	0.918	0.738
	TSE3	0.945	4.534				
	TSE4	0.787	2.071				
	TSE5	0.779	1.990				

TEI, teacher's emotional intelligence; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; TSE, teacher's self-efficacy; TP, teacher's performance.

TABLE 2 | Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker-1981 Criteria).

Construct	EBBE	TEI	TP	TSE
EBBE	***0.742***			
TEI	0.676	***0.772***		
TP	0.485	0.318	***0.822***	
TSE	0.478	0.294	0.351	***0.859***

TEI, teacher's emotional intelligence; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; TSE, teacher's self-efficacy; TP, teacher's performance. The bold values are indicate the results for corresponding statistics for whole variable not the items.

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Construct	BE	TEI	TP	TSE
BE	–	–	–	–
TEI	0.691	–	–	–
TP	0.606	0.359	–	–
TSE	0.564	0.300	0.392	–

TEI, teacher's emotional intelligence; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; TSE, teacher's self-efficacy; TP, teacher's performance.

EBBE (Hair et al., 2016). Predictive relevance (Q^2) of the model is observed satisfactory as value of Q^2 has been observed larger than zero (Geisser, 1975).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses testing in this study is carried out on the basis of path estimates; in this regard, p and t statistics have been inspected. **Table 4** depicts/illustrates path estimation, while

TABLE 4 | Direct, indirect, and total path estimates.

Direct path	Beta	SD	*t*	*p*
TEI - > EBBE	0.532	0.040	13.336	**0.000**
TEI - > TP	0.318	0.056	5.679	**0.000**
TEI - > TSE	0.294	0.055	5.302	**0.000**
TP - > EBBE	0.231	0.049	4.730	**0.000**
TSE - > EBBE	0.240	0.038	6.356	**0.000**
Specified indirect path				
TEI - > TSE - > EBBE	0.071	0.017	4.147	**0.000**
TEI - > TP - > EBBE	0.073	0.020	3.674	**0.000**
Total indirect path				
TEI - > BE	0.144	0.027	5.272	**0.000**
Total path				
TEI - > EBBE	0.676	0.029	23.392	**0.000**

TEI, teacher's emotional intelligence; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; TSE, teacher's self-efficacy; TP, teacher's performance. The bold values are indicate the results for corresponding statistics for whole variable not the items.

Table 5 illustrates hypotheses testing. H1, i.e., teachers' EI is positively related to EBBE, has been proved statistically significant ($t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$). The value of coefficient in this regard is 0.532, which indicates that one unit change in teacher's EI will bring 0.532 unit change in EBBE. Thus, H1 is supported. Similarly, second hypothesis (H2) of this study, i.e., teacher's EI is positively related to teacher's self-efficacy, and it has also been statistically proved, which indicates that teacher's EI promotes teacher's self-efficacy. This argument is supported through p and t statistics ($t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$), and the value of beta in this regard indicates that one unit change in teachers' EI will bring 0.294 units change in teachers' self-efficacy, providing an evidence that H2 is supported. Similarly, H3 of this study, which is related to teachers' EI, is positively related to teaching performance and is also statistically proved on the basis of t and p statistics. Both the parameters of hypothesis testing are met. Thus, H3 is supported. The last two hypotheses are related to the mediation effect, and these two are also supported through the statistical evidence as indirect effect in both cases is found statistically significant ($t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$). Specified indirect effect in both cases is almost equal and statistically significant. Hence, both H4 and H5 are supported. Thus, it can be argued that teachers' EI promotes teachers' self-efficacy, which further improves the EBBE. Similarly, teacher's EI increases teacher's performance, which further increases EBBE.

DISCUSSION

This research focused on developing a sense of branding in educational institutions. As suggested by Mourad et al. (2011), it is possible to develop brand equity in higher education, and to our understanding, teachers are the employees of educational institutes, which could be a part of EBBE. Therefore, this study was designed and conducted. The aspects, associated with teachers such as their EI, self-efficacy, and performance, were assessed based on the suggestions of previous investigations

TABLE 5 | Hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses		Coefficient (Beta)	S.D.	*t*	*p*	Status
H1	TEI - > EBBE	0.532	0.040	13.336	0.000	Supported
H2	TEI - > TSE	0.294	0.055	5.302	0.000	Supported
H3	TEI - > TP	0.318	0.056	5.679	0.000	Supported
Mediation hypotheses						
H4	TEI - > TSE - > EBBE	0.071	0.017	4.147	0.000	Supported
H5	TEI - > TP - > EBBE	0.073	0.020	3.674	0.000	Supported

TEI, teacher's emotional intelligence; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; TSE, teacher's self-efficacy; TP, teacher's performance.

such as Wu et al. (2018). The research provided notable insights into the previously unexplored dimension of EBBE development in educational institutes. Some direct, as well as indirect, relationships between these factors were studied in the research.

The major direct relationship between teachers' EI and EBBE proved that intelligence associated with the emotions of the teachers is a strong predictor of EBBE in educational institutes. This is supported by the fact that EI provides the support to individuals to cope with any kind of circumstances (Naderi Anari, 2012; Wu et al., 2018). While teachers are the employees of educational institutions, they are more concerned with the results of their students. Once their students get good grades, they are automatically charged up for doing more dedicated efforts in future. All this comes through their EI. This helps in developing brand equity for the respective organization as well. Previously, no research has been conducted in this regard.

The other direct relationships of EI with teachers' self-efficacy and teaching performance have also been studied in this research. The results indicated that teachers' EI was strongly associated with their self-efficacy and performance. This happens because EI bridges the association of lacking motivation in teachers for doing their best. Previously, some researchers found that EI of teachers was significantly affecting their self-efficacy (Yazici et al., 2011; Gharetepeh et al., 2015; Black et al., 2019; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2019; Valente et al., 2020). This suggests that educators with higher levels of EI are more efficacious in their job. The obtained result was consistent with the conclusions of Sarkhosh's investigations (Sarkhosh and Rezaee, 2014). At higher educational institutions and language institutes, these studies found a favorable relationship between teachers' EI and self-efficacy.

Furthermore, the outcome backs up Chan's findings (Chan, 2004). Teachers in primary and secondary schools showed a strong relationship between EI and self-efficacy, according to these studies. Considering the findings of several studies on EI and teacher efficacy, as well as the conclusions of this study, it can be concluded that the aspect of teachers' self-efficacy is crucial and significant, irrespective of the academic settings in which they teach. Keeping it precise, it is understood that no matter where the teacher is teaching, their EI leads to self-efficacy. The results of this study are also in agreement with some of the scholars who found strong association between EI and teaching performance (Wahyudi, 2018; Kaur et al., 2019; Akhtar et al., 2020). These results are clearly indicating that if EI of teachers is considered efficiently then their performance improves.

The indirect effects of teachers' self-efficacy were also tested in this study between teachers' EI and EBBE. The results provided support for mediating the role of teachers' self-efficacy in this relationship. Although the direct effects were also significant, it proved that if teachers were more self-efficacious in their teaching, then it could enhance the association of EI with EBBE. Hence, it strengthened our notion that the EI of teachers could predict EBBE in their institutions. Previously, teachers' self-efficacy was considered to affect the techniques of teachers, their passion, dedication to instruct, and behaviors, as well as their ability in dealing with challenging students (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2007). Some of the past researchers also found significant mediation of teachers' self-efficacy in different perspectives (Shaterian Mohamadi and Asadzadeh, 2011; Kunemund et al., 2020).

The last hypothesis was about mediating role of teaching performance of the teachers between teachers' EI and EBBE. The results proved that if teaching performance becomes the target of teachers in the sense of competing with other teachers at their workplace, then it could lead to the sense of competition. Due to this kind of competition, teachers are more motivated to prove their worth. The EI of such teachers helps them in doing their best among others. Although the role of EI in having a positive impact on EBBE development is also significant in this research, teaching performance proved that such a task-oriented dimension of teaching could enhance the relationship of EI with EBBE. Previously, few researchers indicated that EI leads to improved teaching performance (Wahyudi, 2018). Some of the scholars indicated that EI, teachers' self-efficacy, and teaching performance are interconnected factors (Wu et al., 2018), and teaching performance was used as a mediator in their studies.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of available empirical evidence of this study, it can be concluded that teacher's EI has the potency to improve the teacher's teaching performance. Similarly, emotionally intelligent teachers improve their self-efficacy, which becomes a source to enhance their teaching performance. Moreover, teachers with high EI improve their commitment level, and they become more loyal and ambassadors of their organizations when their brand-based equity is established. Thus, organizations should focus on improving the EI of their teaching staff so that their teaching performance and self-efficacy could be improved. Teachers with high emotional intelligent can promote a constructive competition at workplace, which can be helpful for other teachers to increase their performance to compete others. This can trigger teachers to get more motivated to prove their worth. Empirical evidence of this study indicates that teachers' EI promotes teachers' self-efficacy, which develops EBBE. Similarly, teacher's EI increases teacher's performance, which further increases EBBE, and employees perceive a sense of pride to be a part of the organization.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From the theoretical perspective, this study has touched the boundaries of EBBE and made an attempt to extend the body of knowledge related to EBBE. Thus, this study contends to add into the knowledge stream of EBBE, teacher's performance, and teacher's EI. This study established that EI has the tendency to develop EBBE, which is a unique contribution into the existing body of knowledge. Second, this study tests mediating role of teachers' self-efficacy between the relationship of teachers' EI and EBBE; third, this study also established a mediating role between the relationship of teachers' EI and EBBE, which is also a contribution of this study. From the practical point of view, this study contends that practitioners should focus on developing EI of the teaching staff and should provide them trainings to enhance their EI. It will promote their self-efficacy, and higher self-efficacy is attached with positive outcomes, so teachers with higher self-efficacy will show positive behaviors at workplace, which will be beneficial for the academic institutes. Additionally, it will promote teachers' performance too.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Just like other studies, this study has also some limitations. First, this study used a cross-sectional research design, which does not allow drawing a cause and effect relationship. So, in future studies, researchers should focus on the longitudinal research design. Second, we have collected data using the convenience sampling technique, so in future, other probability sampling techniques should be used to collect data for improved and deeper insights. We have used the non-parametric data analysis tool, thus using the parametric data analysis tool in future can provide interesting outcomes. Additionally, we have used a mediating phenomenon through teacher's self-efficacy and teaching performance, so in future, other possible mediators can also be used. In this regard, job satisfaction can be a potential mediator. Similarly, the moderating phenomenon such as supervisor's support, organizational support, and prevalence of ethical climate can also be used as potential moderators of the study. Similarly, it would be interesting to split EBBE and brand allegiance, brand endorsement, and brand consistent behavior should be checked in future studies. Moreover, in future studies, comparison of perception of college and university teachers could provide deeper insights.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and approved by Shanghai University of Finance and Economics (SUFE), Shanghai, China. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants for their participation in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

QL drafted the final manuscript. NI did analysis and proofread. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Internationalization Issues in Chinese Firms: One Belt, One Road-Based Perspective

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The underlying aim of this study was to investigate the impact of human resource management (HRM) practices, organizational identity, and brand leadership on employee brand-based equity through the mediatory role of brand knowledge dissemination. A questionnaire was adopted to obtain data from 421 employees working in the construction sector of China. The SmartPLS software was used to analyze the data with the help of a structural equation modeling (SEM) technique. The results revealed that HRM practices and organizational identity had a positive and significant relationship with employee brand-based equity, while brand leadership had no direct impact on employee brand-based equity. The results also revealed that brand knowledge dissemination mediated the relationship between independent variables (HRM practices, organizational identity, and brand leadership) and dependent variable (employee brand-based equity). Theoretically, this paper made a valuable contribution by examining the impact of HRM practices, organizational identity, and brand leadership on employee brand-based equity. In terms of practical implications, this study would obviously help the organizations to improve their employee brand-based equity through HRM practices and organizational identity.

Keywords: employee brand-based equity, internationalization issues, HRM practices, brand knowledge dissemination, organizational identity

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INTRODUCTION

Once China's Go Global strategy was implemented, Chinese companies have been increasingly interested in internationalization, whether it may be through direct investment or cross-border acquisitions and mergers (Buckley et al., 2007; Wei, 2010). Therefore, China's outbound foreign investment has been gradually increasing. Likewise, China, which was traditionally linked to enormous private investment outflows, has emerged as a significant global investor (Liu et al., 2005). Only the United States surpassed the yearly investment level of 183 billion dollars in 2016 (Haasis and Liefner, 2019). The enormous globalization of Chinese enterprises has already been extensively monitored and actively discussed among researchers (Blomkvist and Drogendijk, 2013).

The origins and types of Chinese enterprises' internationalization, and the ramifications for China's economic catch-up process and the global economy, are the central focus of this argument (Lattemann and Alon, 2015). Researchers have emphasized the major involvement of the government and state-owned businesses in the internationalization of Chinese firms, often in opposition to the internationalization trends of developed corporations and nations

(Yang and Stoltenberg, 2014; Li et al., 2016). Scholars have also looked at how Chinese enterprises keep up to the west rivals despite a lack of firm-specific strengths, as well as the influence of Chinese firms' internationalization on their economic condition (Peng, 2012; Clegg et al., 2016). Moreover, empirical evidence on Chinese enterprises' internationalization is still in its infancy and fragmented (Hao et al., 2020b).

Deng made one attempt to resolve the scattered nature of research on Chinese enterprises' internationalization. Deng evaluated the academic literature on the research subject from 1990 to 2010, grouping the surveys into three key groups (origins, procedures, and consequences of Chinese enterprises' internationalization) (Deng, 2012). One belt, one road initiative was initiated during early years of the second decade of 2000 for economic integration (Shahriar, 2019). One of the goals with this project is to increase China's commercial viability by spending on infrastructure in Africa, Europe, and Asia. One belt, one road is the greatest infrastructural plan ever implemented by a particular country. China's ambition is to develop the world's biggest campaign to showcase business and financial links with the entire world under its auspices (Pandey, 2018). China is allowing its corporations, largely attributed businesses, to transfer their knowledge in these sectors after modernizing the place with strong train lines, highways, and electricity.

China's "going-out" policy has evolved through time, with each iteration aiming to further China's trade integration (Das, 2017). This could be possible with the identification of organizational challenges of Chinese firms linked to internationalization challenges. In these circumstances, human resource management (HRM) is the most significant and sensitive of all management areas in the local and international environment (Zhang, 2022). The most popular method of starting a new industry—acquisitions and mergers—necessitates more effort and management expertise in disseminating and integrating a strategy of the company, values, and practices, which is solely the domain of HRM. HRM has evolved along with firms' internationalization policies, such as international employment and talent practices which are linked to the whole company's strategy (Lee et al., 2021).

HRM is unquestionably helpful in the internationalization process, but it is rarely invited to strategic meetings. Because of a variety of issues, including a failure to demonstrate the required competency (Subramony et al., 2021). Organizations' desire to increase productivity through HRM practices has brought up the question of what capabilities, expertise, and knowledge HR managers require applying such practices and assisting the internationalization process (Cascio and Boudreau, 2016). Organizational identity is a psychological paradigm that refers to what employees consider to be fundamental, distinctive, and long-lasting about their company (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Transforming a firm's identity necessitates modifications to organizational members' internal psychological structures and attitudes, which can lead to resistance and the inability to execute change (Nag et al., 2007).

Whereas the majority of this study has focused on existing organizations, altering the organizational identity of new ventures is as difficult and can take longer than the age of the venture at the time the transition occurs (Tripsas, 2009; Snihur and Clarysse, 2022). Such results emphasize intriguing questions about the impact of organizational identity all through internationalization, as well as the interaction between organizational members' cognition and the ongoing change implied by pivoting in nascent markets, which is frequently depicted by academics and practitioners as seemingly smooth transitions (Blank, 2013; Marx and Hsu, 2015). Customers' decision-making procedure to acquire goods and services is influenced significantly by brand leadership. Authenticity, affordability, innovativeness, and popularity are four important elements of brand leadership as viewed by customers.

Firstly, quality is described as "consumers' assessment of a product's relative superiority in the marketplace." Secondly, "consumers' appraisal of a product's relative financial value based on what they provide and get" is what value refers to (Miller and Mills, 2012; Chang and Ko, 2014). Thirdly, consumers' perceptions of a brand's relative capacity to be open to creative ideas and work on new solutions are described as "consumers' perceptions of a brand's relative capability to be open to innovative ideas and work on new solutions." Finally, "consumers' sense of a brand's relative popularity as represented by brand awareness and consumption" is what popularity refers to. Consumers also want brand leadership to have a clear vision and to stay current (Akbar et al., 2021; Khamwon and Sorataworn, 2021).

Internal branding, according to academics, may be utilized to maintain uniform staff behaviors and attitudes (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Employer branding contributes to employee behaviors and attitudes by delivering relevant and meaningful brand information. Furthermore, such psychological and cognitive shifts mean that workers transmit the brand value to customers as planned (Avotra et al., 2021; Yingfei et al., 2021). As a result, it is critical to disseminate brand knowledge inside the corporate branding. Workers, for instance, are unable to convey an organization's brand identity to consumers lacking brand-related knowledge. Moreover, few stated that "workers may feel directionless, grappling with understanding where, when, or to whom to devote their energy" in the lack of brand awareness (Zulkepli et al., 2015).

Employee-based brand equity (EBBE) relates to the perception of additional value that workers obtain as a consequence of brand-building activities (Helm et al., 2016). Employees' internalization of the company's values is a crucial element in internal branding, as continuous execution of the brand promise to consumers is improbable without it. Internal branding success depends on internal stakeholders' alignment with the company's values and how this interpretation translates to brand- and/or customer-related behaviors (Du Preez et al., 2017). Consumers' experiences with the brand promise will remain ineffective without employees' orientation with the brand value (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020). It was necessary to develop EBBE and evaluation of determinants of EBBE in the context of internationalization of Chinese firms while thinking about economic developing in one belt, one road perspective.

In the perspective of one belt, one road, there was a need to integrate the concept of internationalization of Chinese firms and associated challenges in terms of developing internal brand equity. Based on this gap in previous studies suggested by García Álvarez de Perea et al. (2019), the following research tried to signify the internationalization challenges associated with one belt, one road initiative at the organizational level of Chinese firms. Moreover, the mediating role of brand knowledge dissemination toward developing employer-based brand equity was not studied before, and to overcome this gap, it was suggested by Zulkepli et al. (2015) to evaluate the mediating role of brand knowledge dissemination which could lead to the development of EBBE. Therefore, this research was carried out focusing the impacts of HRM practices, organizational identity, and brand leadership on EBBE through mediation of brand knowledge dissemination.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

According to resource-based theory (RBT) (Zica et al., 2016), good business performance is dependent on a unique set of strategic resources that the firm must possess and successfully utilize (Mikalef and Gupta, 2021). The financial, technical, human, and organizational resources that a company employs to design, manufacture, and provide services or goods to its clients are all effectiveness of organizational resources (Agyabeng-Mensah and Tang, 2021). To meet the RBT's standards, businesses must have high-quality human resources available to meet client expectations and remain competitive in the marketplace (Islam et al., 2021). Employees are a strategic tool for companies to create and build relations, particularly knowledge-based strategic resources that are unique to the company in which they work (Chowdhury et al., 2022). As a result, an organization's leadership, in collaboration with human resource (HR) experts, must utilize HRs for intra-organizational and cross-functional interaction in the most effective way to achieve organizational goals (Germain and McGuire, 2022).

This theory provided basis for analyzing the impact of HRM and brand leadership for internalization of organizations. Identification-based relationships, on the contrary, are found here in social identity theory, which explains employee relationships as a match among personal and corporate identities (Erkmen, 2018). The social identity theory (SIT) is the foundation of this research. The SIT was used in a variety of settings, including psychology of consumers, information dissemination, and the connection between sports franchises and their supporters (Dimofte et al., 2014; Mckinley et al., 2014; Ambrose and Schnitzlein, 2017). The SIT is a core theory in cognitive science that has been used to explain group psychology, interacting, and social perspectives. It was proposed by Tajfel and Turner (2004).

The component of one's self-concept that stems out from social group or groups to which someone belongs, as well as the significance and psychological value linked to affiliation to an organization, is referred to as social identity. It is the aspect of self-identity that is mostly generated from belonging to a group (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). People tend to associate and link themselves to diverse social groups as a way of selecting self-identity and a feeling of belonging. As per this theory, employees find the importance and significance of organizational identity. As a result, humans form a sense of social identity regarding the social characteristics of the groups to which they belong, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and political party (Chan, 2016). Therefore, this theory provided basis for analyzing the impact of organizational identity on EBBE.

Human Resource Management Practices Significantly Impact the Employee Brand-Based Equity

Human resource management practices describe the management methods that enable firms to obtain valuable and outstanding information, as well as impact creative activity and greater performance (Cao et al., 2021). HRM impacts workers' job-related attitudes, talents, and behaviors in order to achieve an organization's goals, and it plays a crucial role in creating an atmosphere that is conducive to knowledge management and innovation (Wen et al., 2021). Because knowledge and innovation have origins in human psychology, numerous previous studies have recommended adopting HRM strategies to better encourage the development and dissemination of knowledge for improved organizational innovation performance (Than et al., 2021). The goal of knowledge-based HRM (KHRM) practices is to improve knowledge processes inside a business (Noopur and Dhar, 2020).

Through particular recruiting and selection, training and career development, performance assessment, and compensation procedures, HRM techniques attempt to improve the flow of knowledge—knowledge acquisition, absorption, transformation, and exchange activities in the business (Roundy and Burke-Smalley, 2021). HRM techniques enhance an organization's human capital foundation while focusing on less apparent value-generating elements such as engagement and knowledge embedded in scalar networks (Ahmad et al., 2021). Individual employees in a business can network with coworkers to establish interpersonal ties through HRM practices (Abugre and Acquaah, 2022).

Employees' creative behavior and overall organizational innovation in the social enterprise are encouraged by HRM methods based on the opportunity–motivation–ability approach (Azeem et al., 2021). As HMR improves knowledge flows in the business, this research advises reinventing and restructuring traditional HRM into HRM to enable coworkers to collaborate in knowledge production and sharing activities to encourage employee creativity (Ahmad et al., 2021). The author suggests that an HRM practice is a collection of carefully selected HRM practices targeted at improving organizational knowledge, influencing human capital, co-creating relevant work experience, and employee brand-based equity for improved creative performance inside the business. Therefore, the author proposed the following hypothesis:

H1: *HRM practices significantly impact the employee brand-based equity.*

Association of Organizational Identity With Employee-Based Brand Equity

Organizational identity emerges through complex, interactive, and reciprocal relationships among administrators, organizational members, and other stakeholders (Cornelissen et al., 2021). The core, unique, and enduring aspects of an organization are characterized as organizational identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Researchers saw this prominence as being rooted in the organization's basic characteristics and differentiation from its competing companies: "organizations preserve identity through engagement with other organizations through a system of cross comparison over time." Eventually, they understood that these lasting features were rooted in the organization's long-term stability. Researchers in the subject of organizational identity find it challenging to extend the notion to businesses (Bala et al., 2021).

This sparked several disputes within the organizational identity community, and organizational identity was eventually established from pragmatic, sociological constructionist, postmodern, and psychological viewpoints. In actuality, organizational identity is not mindlessly followed; instead, organizational identity is defined by the meanings that members of an organization ascribe to it. As a result, researchers have begun to study organizational identity from a social constructionist viewpoint, which focuses on an organization's members' cognitive capacities in grasping "who we are" as a group (He and Brown, 2013). Organizations, on the contrary, do not operate in a vacuum, and their actions have an impact on society. Members of an organization also perceive organizational identity to relate to "how others see us" in this way (Mujib, 2017).

Managers, who give supportive leadership that fosters staff brand-building activities, benefit firms and favorably influence customers' brand impression (Xie et al., 2016). An employee's identity with a company is influenced by his or her work placement, which in turn impacts his or her conduct when communicating with customers. In addition, De Chernatony et al. (2006) asserted that employees are informed about brand values through unsubtle official communications, including cascading effect through one level of workers to another, senior leadership engagement and management, and human resource operations. Employee brand internalization is influenced by how the organization is represented, understood, and conveyed inwardly (Lane Keller, 1999).

Similarly, corporate identity has a significant impact on employee brand internalization. It is clear that executive brand identity has a favorable impact on staff brand internalization (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020). Transforming a firm's identity in internationalization scenario necessitates modifications to organizational members' internal psychological structures and attitudes, which can lead to resistance and the inability to execute change (Nag et al., 2007). The impact of organizational identity on EBBE was reported by Liu et al. (2020), indicating that brand identity among employees directs the positive outcomes of EBBE. Based on this analogy, the author developed the following hypothesis:

H2: *Organizational identity has a significant relationship with employee brand-based equity.*

Brand Leadership Positively Influences Employee Brand-Based Equity

A brand, according to the American Marketing Association, is "a name, word, design, image, or any other element that distinguishes one seller's item or service from most of the other sellers (Ngoc and Tien, 2021)." Managers may use brands to create points of difference and long-term competitive advantages by reflecting a product's economic and functional attributes, as well as important intangible associations such as competence and reliability (Rambocas and Narsingh, 2022). Three significant factors for establishing a meaningful brand are integrated into the brand strategic framework (Thomson et al., 2022).

First, the brand building takes into account both quantitative and qualitative measures such as a company's reputation, its countries of origin, product characteristics, quality associations, and perceived reliability (Bairrada et al., 2021). Second, brand occurs when a company uses consistent imagery and delivery to reinforce a brand's meaning and context, which necessitates supportive organizational structures and procedures (Buhalis and Park, 2021). As a result, marketers must use a "bottom–up and top–down strategy to brand creation" to guarantee that employees are actively involved in the process (Van Nguyen et al., 2021). Third, the framework implies that marketers that are unable to engage in standardized branding programs to address the individual demands of their consumer segments must be able to adjust branding programs across countries and client segments. Therefore, the authors proposed the following hypothesis:

H3: *Brand leadership positively influences employee brand-based equity.*

Mediating Relationship of Brand Knowledge Dissemination

Employee corporate brand experience is defined as every interaction workers have with an employer identity, including a variety of brand touchpoints (Saleem and Hawkins, 2021). And brand knowledge is composed of a particular brand in the memory that is related to a range of connections (Han et al., 2021). The way brand networks are organized in one's memory affects how brand information is remembered, which in turn affects an individual's behavior and brand-related behaviors (Farzin et al., 2021). While Keller (1993, 1998) focuses on the consumer, brand awareness is also important for employees (Carlini and Grace, 2021). That really is, brand understanding is the key to employees' knowing how to execute the brand promise (Boukis et al., 2021).

Employees that lack brand expertise are unable to behave in the manner required by the business or make brand-related decisions, which is compatible with the customer viewpoint (Peng et al., 2021). In the field of branding and marketing

management, the concept of EBBE has received a lot of attention. Any company's brand is one of its most significant intangible assets. Brand equity may be used to analyze the impact of previous marketing activities, evaluate the brand's current positioning, and forecast the future success. The differential influence of brand awareness on employee response to the workplace is known as EBBE.

Internal branding may be utilized to maintain uniform staff behaviors and attitudes (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Employer branding contributes to employee behaviors and attitudes by delivering relevant and meaningful brand information. Furthermore, such psychological and cognitive shifts mean that workers transmit the brand value to customers as planned (Hao et al., 2020a). As a result, it is critical to disseminate brand knowledge inside the corporate branding. Workers, for instance, are unable to convey an organization's brand identity to consumers lacking brand-related knowledge. Moreover, few stated that "workers may feel directionless, grappling with understanding where, when, or to whom to devote their energy" in the lack of brand awareness (Zulkepli et al., 2015). Keeping in view the significance of brand knowledge dissemination as mediator, the author proposed the following hypotheses:

H4: *Brand knowledge dissemination mediates the relationship between HRM practices and EBBE.*

H5: *Brand knowledge dissemination mediates the relationship between organizational identity and EBBE.*

H6: *Brand knowledge dissemination mediates the relationship between brand leadership and EBBE.*

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized the quantitative research design for the validation of the hypothesis for the present study. The hypotheses of the study helped to examine the effect of predictors on outcomes. This research design helped to eliminate any biases. The data for this study were collected through a self-administered survey. The rationality of data was made sure by making the items of each clear and short. The target population was the employees working in the construction sector. The current study used a convenience sampling technique in order to sample from the target population. This technique is a cost-effective and effective method to acquire data from the respondents (Nawaz et al., 2019). Initially, 500 questionnaires were distributed and the author received 421 responses. The unit of analysis was the employees of the construction sector in China.

Statistical Tool

SmartPLS 3 software was used in this study for the purpose of data analysis. The technique used in our study is structural equation modeling (SEM). Partial least square is extensively used in management and social sciences as it is a variance-based SEM technique (Nawaz et al., 2020). Moreover, PLS-SEM is a causal modeling approach and its aim is to magnify the explained variance of latent dependent constructs. Researchers view PLS-SEM as "silver bullet" conducive to deal with empirical findings with small sample size (Hair et al., 2011). SmartPLS has a user-friendly interface and contains advanced features (Garson, 2016). Furthermore, the technique used in SmartPLS is finest to serve a research having complex equations (Xiaolong et al., 2021; Nawaz et al., 2022). To calculate the values of beta, reliability, and standard error precisely, this study follows the recommendations of Wong (2013) and ensures that all those indicators are part of their respective latent variables having outer loadings of 0.7 in the reflective outer model evaluation.

Measurement

A five-point Likert scale was used to obtain data for each item of the variable under study. The reliability of each variable using Cronbach's alpha should be more than 0.7 (Sarstedt et al., 2017).

Human Resource Management Practices

Human resource management practices were measured by using the scale of Aurand et al. (2005) that comprises five items. The Cronbach alpha for this variable is $\alpha = 0.927$; therefore, this scale is reliable.

Organizational Identity

Organizational identity was measured by using items of Hanson and Haridakis (2008) that consist of 17 items. The Cronbach alpha for this variable is ($\alpha = 0.920$); therefore, this scale is reliable.

Brand Leadership

The present study utilized the scale of Morhart et al. (2009) that adopted the items from the multifactor leadership questionnaire from 5X (Avolio et al., 2004) to measure the brand leadership. The Cronbach alpha for this variable is $\alpha = 0.924$; therefore, this scale is reliable.

Brand Knowledge Dissemination

Brand knowledge dissemination was measured by using scale of Foreman and Money (1995) that is comprised of five items. The Cronbach alpha for this variable is $\alpha = 0.894$; therefore, this scale is reliable.

Employee Brand-Based Equity

To measure employee brand-based equity, the scale of Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) was used consisting of 19 items. The Cronbach alpha for this variable is $\alpha = 0.920$; therefore, this scale is reliable.

Demographic Details

The demographic details of the respondents who have participated in the study are discussed below. The total participants of the study were 421, and out of them, 270 were males and 151 were females. The employees between the age bracket 20 and 30 years were 29%, between 30 and 40 years were 43%, between 41 and 50 years were 20%, and above the age of 50 years were 8%. Furthermore, the employees with an organizational tenure of less than a year were 46.20%, the employees with an organizational tenure of between 1 and 3 years were 40.63%, the employees with an organizational tenure of

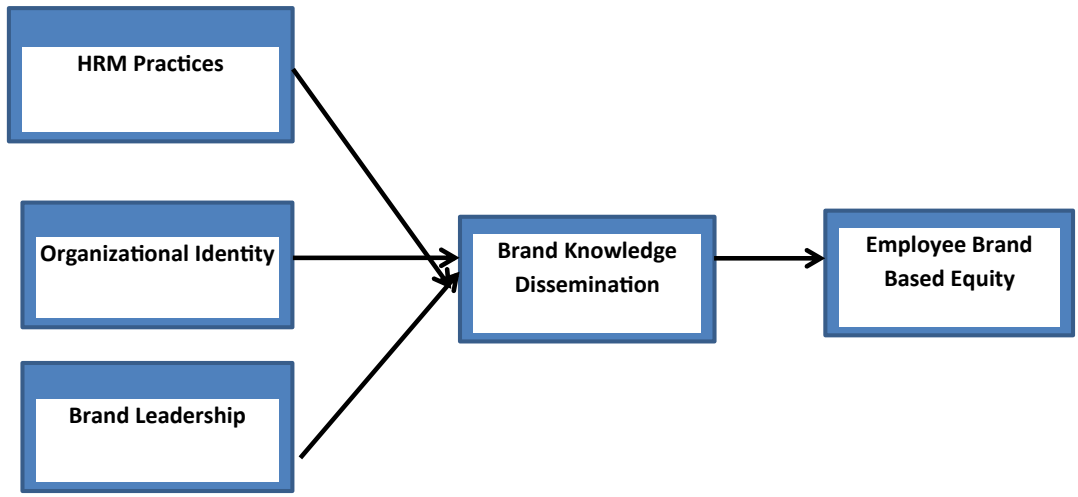

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual model. HRM, human resource management; OI, organizational identity; BI, brand leadership; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

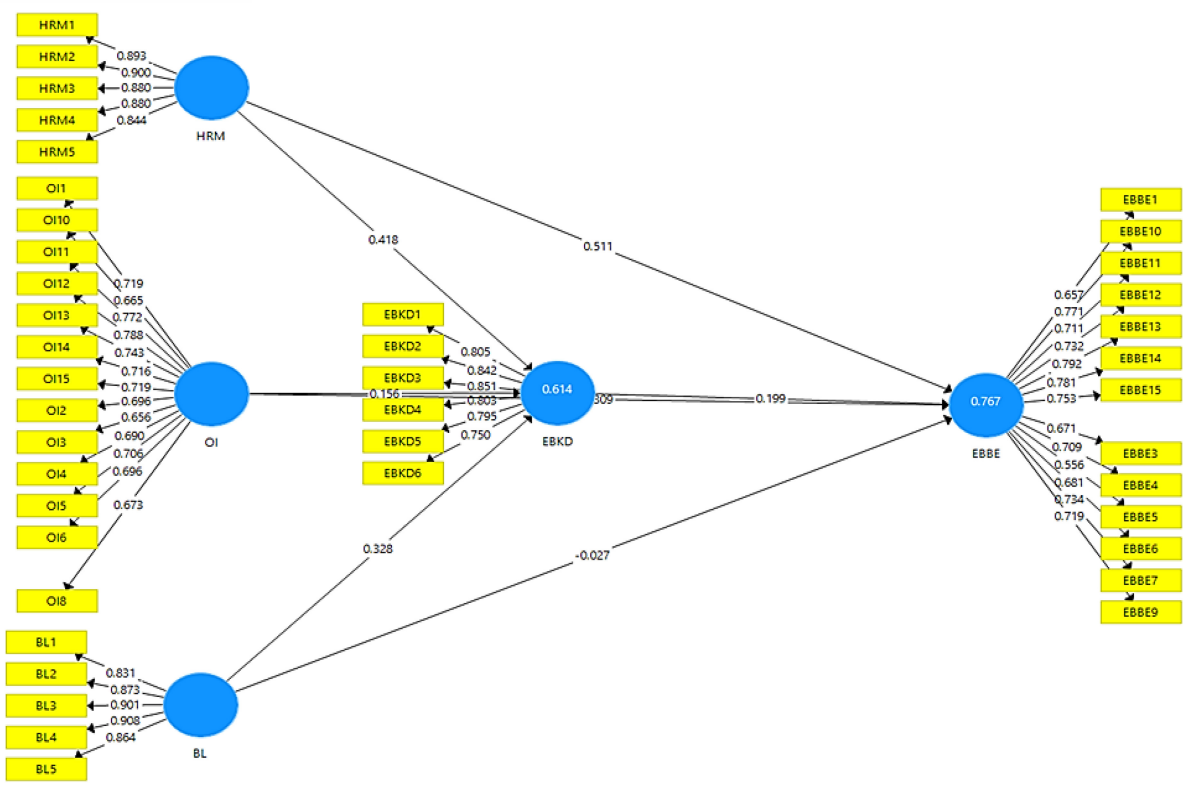

FIGURE 2 | Output of measurement model algorithm. HRM, human resource management; OI, organizational identity; BI, brand leadership; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

between 4 and 6 years were 7.98%, while the employees with an organizational tenure of more than 6 years were 5.19%.

Common Method Bias

This study used a single Harman's factor test to analyze common method variance in order to check for common method bias in the data (CMV). SPSS 21 was utilized in this study to perform the single Harman's factor test. The results of the created (principal axis factoring and extraction) suggest that there are 43 factors. The maximum covariance explained by one factor in this study is 40.763 percent, according to Harman's one-factor test.

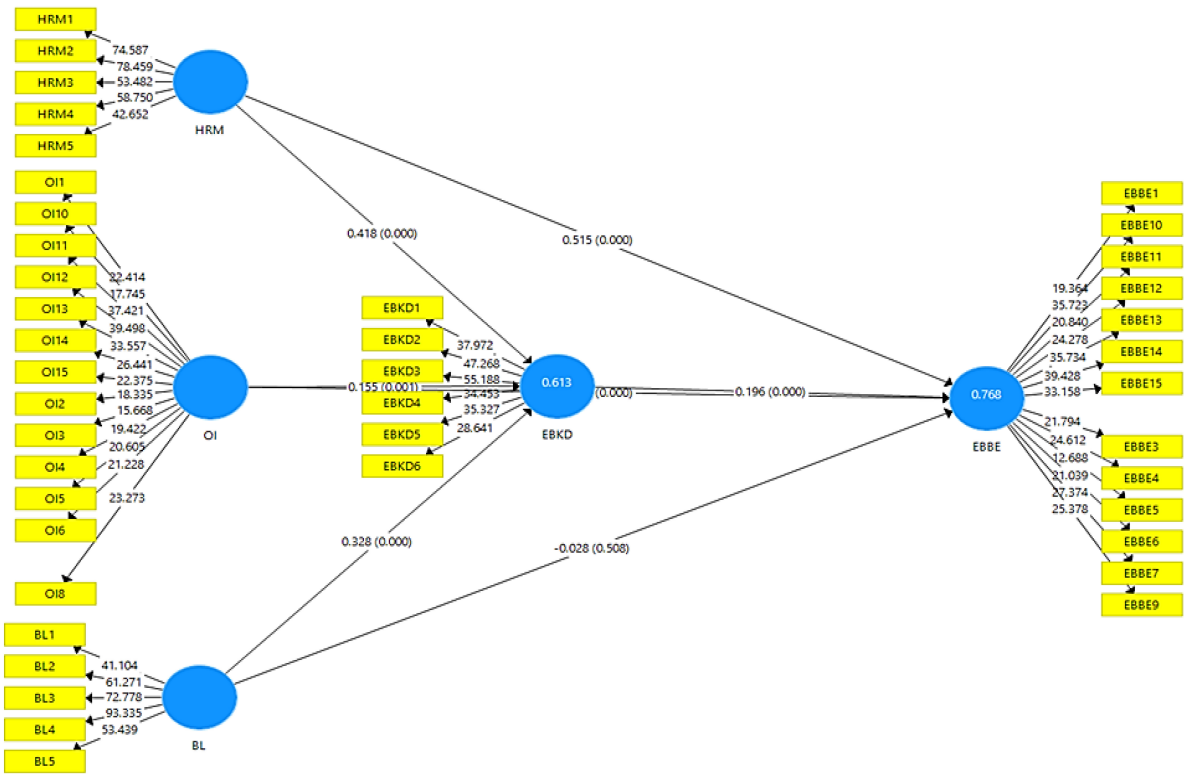

FIGURE 3 | Structural model with moderation.

TABLE 1 | Discriminant validity (HTMT Ratio).

	Fornell–Larcker criterion						Heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratios				
	BL	**EBBE**	**EBKD**	**HRM**	**OI**		**BL**	**EBBE**	**EBKD**	**HRM**	**OI**
BL	0.876					BL					
EBBE	0.679	0.715				EBBE	0.711				
EBKD	0.644	0.695	0.808			EBKD	0.696	0.814			
HRM	0.598	0.650	0.722	0.879		HRM	0.639	0.792	0.792		
OI	0.519	0.617	0.573	0.591	0.712	OI	0.534	0.747	0.604	0.606	

HRM, human resource management; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; OI, organizational identity; BL, brand leadership; EBKD, employee brand knowledge dissemination.

TABLE 2 | Direct effects.

Structural paths	Path coefficient (*t*-value)	Confidence interval	F2	*P*-values	Results
HRM - > EBBE	0.515 (12.997)	{0.516 to 0.655}	0.665	0.000	H1, Supported
OI - > EBBE	0.310 (8.588)	{0.260 to 0.419}	0.419	0.000	*H2, Supported*
BL - > EBBE	–0.028 (0.662)	{–0.411 to 0.125}	0.125	0.508	H3, Not-supported

HRM, human resource management; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; OI, organizational identity; BL, brand leadership, level of significance = 0.05.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Measurement Model

The first step of PLS-SEM analysis is the assessment of measurement model (**Figure 1**). The output measurement model algorithm is shown in **Figure 2**. It explains the impact of independent variables on dependent variables.

In measurement model specification, examining the indicator reliability is considered the first step. As part of measurement model, a total of three items (EBBE2, OI7, and OI9) were removed due to low factor loading (<0.500). Reliability as

TABLE 3 | Demographic details.

Demographics	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	270	
Female	151	
Age (Years)		
20–30	122	29%
30–40	181	43%
40–50	84	20%
>50	34	8%
Organizational tenure		
<1 Year	194	46.20%
1–3 Years	171	40.63%
4–6 Years	33	8%
>6 Years	23	6%

assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability: statistics for both were greater than the recommended value 0.700 (Wasko and Faraj, 2005). Convergent validity was acceptable because AVE was above 0.500 in majority.

Discriminant validity was assessed by comparison of the correlations among the latent variables and the square root of AVE (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlation (Henseler et al., 2015), with values below the (conservative) threshold of 0.85. Hence, discriminant validity is established.

Structural Model

The structural model includes the paths hypothesized in the research framework (**Figure 3**). A structural model is assessed on the basis of R^2, Q^2, and significance of paths. R-square indicates the variance that has been described in dependent variable (Hair et al., 2014). Furthermore, the value of R^2 can range from 0 to 1. **Table 1** shows the value of 0.614 for employee brand knowledge dissemination and 0.767 for employee brand-based equity. As values of R-square are between 0 and 1, predictive capability is established. Moreover, to assess the goodness of model, hypotheses were tested to determine the significance of relationships.

H1 evaluates the relationship between HRM practices and employee brand-based equity (**Tables 2–5**). The results revealed that HRM practices have a significant impact on employee brand-based equity (β 0.515, t = 12.997, p = 0.000). Hence, H1 is supported. H2 examines the relationship between organizational identity and employee brand-based equity. The results showed that organizational identity positively influences the EBBE (β 0.310, t = 8.558, p = 0.000). Therefore, H2 is accepted. Moreover, H3 evaluates the relationship between brand leadership and employee brand-based equity. The results showed that brand leadership positively influences the employee brand-based equity (β = –0.028, t = 0.662, p = 0.508). Therefore, H3 is rejected.

In order to test the significance of path coefficients, bootstrapping procedure was used as recommended by Sarstedt et al. (2017). Nevertheless, specific guidelines proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) were also considered for mediation analysis. Furthermore, 5,000 bootstrap samples were considered as suggested by Streukens and Leroi-Werelds (2016). This study's bootstrap re-sampling 5000 also shows 95% confidence interval as shown in **Table 2**. A confidence interval different from zero indicates a significant relationship.

TABLE 4 | Common method bias.

Factor	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	18.097	42.085	42.085	17.528	40.763	40.763
2	3.712	8.634	50.719			
3	2.054	4.777	55.496			
4	1.245	2.895	58.391			
5	1.204	2.799	61.190			
6	1.164	2.707	63.897			
7	0.941	2.188	66.086			
8	0.914	2.125	68.210			
9	0.898	2.089	70.299			
10	0.801	1.863	72.162			
11	0.760	1.769	73.931			
12	0.685	1.594	75.525			
13	0.626	1.456	76.981			
14	0.589	1.371	78.351			
15	0.546	1.270	79.621			
16	0.519	1.206	80.828			
17	0.504	1.172	82.000			
18	0.495	1.152	83.152			
19	0.487	1.133	84.284			
20	0.454	1.055	85.339			
21	0.439	1.020	86.359			
22	0.411	0.957	87.316			
23	0.393	0.913	88.229			
24	0.383	0.892	89.121			
25	0.364	0.847	89.968			
26	0.346	0.805	90.773			
27	0.338	0.785	91.558			
28	0.334	0.776	92.335			
29	0.294	0.685	93.019			
30	0.291	0.677	93.696			
31	0.282	0.655	94.351			
32	0.264	0.615	94.966			
33	0.249	0.578	95.544			
34	0.243	0.565	96.109			
35	0.232	0.539	96.649			
36	0.221	0.514	97.162			
37	0.209	0.485	97.647			
38	0.200	0.464	98.112			
39	0.188	0.437	98.549			
40	0.169	0.393	98.942			
41	0.162	0.376	99.318			
42	0.153	0.357	99.675			
43	0.140	0.325	100.000			

TABLE 5 | Factor loadings, Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and AVE.

Construct	Items	Loadings	CR	Alpha	AVE	VIF
Brand leadership			0.943	0.924	0.767	
	BL1	0.831				2.222
	BL2	0.873				2.836
	BL3	0.901				3.466
	BL4	0.908				3.695
	BL5	0.864				2.794
Employee brand-based equity			0.931	0.920	0.512	
	EBBE1	0.657				1.691
	EBBE10	0.771				2.390
	EBBE11	0.711				1.931
	EBBE12	0.732				2.168
	EBBE13	0.792				2.410
	EBBE14	0.781				2.789
	EBBE15	0.753				2.487
	EBBE3	0.671				2.093
	EBBE4	0.709				2.143
	EBBE5	0.556				1.488
	EBBE6	0.681				1.897
	EBBE7	0.734				2.301
	EBBE9	0.719				1.948
Brand knowledge dissemination			0.919	0.894	0.654	
	EBKD1	0.805				2.018
	EBKD2	0.842				2.557
	EBKD3	0.851				2.599
	EBKD4	0.803				2.085
	EBKD5	0.795				1.995
	EBKD6	0.750				1.787
HRM practices			0.945	0.927	0.773	
	HRM1	0.893				3.599
	HRM2	0.900				3.818
	HRM3	0.880				2.936
	HRM4	0.880				2.880
	HRM5	0.844				2.387
Organizational identity			0.930	0.920	0.507	
	OI1	0.719				2.587
	OI10	0.665				1.823
	OI11	0.772				2.450
	OI12	0.788				2.621
	OI13	0.743				2.056
	OI14	0.716				1.948
	OI15	0.719				1.840
	OI2	0.696				2.743
	OI3	0.656				2.245
	OI4	0.690				2.224
	OI5	0.706				2.168
	OI6	0.696				2.029
	OI8	0.673				1.792

HRM, human resource management; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; OI, organizational identity; BL, brand leadership; EBKD, employee brand knowledge dissemination.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was performed to assess the mediating effect of brand knowledge dissemination. This study adopts variance accounted for VAF approach for mediation analysis (An et al., 2021). The results revealed that brand knowledge dissemination partially mediated the relationship between HRM practices and EBBE as value of VIF > 25. Similarly, the EBKD partially mediates the relationship of OI and EBBE as value of VAF > 25. EBKD fully mediates the relationship of BL and EBBE as value of VAF > 80 (see **Table 6**).

DISCUSSION

This research was conducted to evaluate the firm-level challenges of internationalization in Chinese context. China is the leading country after the United States investing single-handedly in international trading. Therefore, it was necessary to find out the right practices which could lead to overcoming the issues of organizations working internationally. Certain direct and indirect relationships of factors contributing toward EBBE were studied in this research. The first hypothesis was about the relationship of HRM practices with EBBE. The hypothesis got accepted due to the fact that if proper human resource practices are followed in any organization, then it leads to the development of brand equity, and in case of employees of the respective organization getting proper human resources, then it leads to EBBE. Similar kind of results was also reported previously (Aurand et al., 2005).

In these circumstances, HRM is the most significant and sensitive of all management areas in the local and international environment (Zhang, 2022). The other direct relationship of organizational identity also proved that if there is a clear identification of brands among the employees, then it could also lead to the development of strong EBBE at the organizational level. Organizational identity is a psychological paradigm that refers to what employees consider to be fundamental, distinctive, and long-lasting about their company (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Transforming a firm's identity in internationalization scenario necessitates modifications to organizational members' internal psychological structures and attitudes, which can lead to resistance and the inability to execute change (Nag et al., 2007). Similar kind of results was reported by Liu et al. (2020), indicating that brand identity among employees directs the positive outcomes of EBBE.

They also found that if proper brand identity is prevalent among employees, then it has an influence on quality of physical facility which ultimately affects consumer-based brand equity as well. The other direct effects of brand leadership were also studied in this research which were not significant in developing EBBE among employees. The possible reason of such outcome lies in the fact that leadership is sometimes not directly related to working employees of lower cadre. This is due to the competition sense among the employees and leaders. Although some of the previous studies proved that brand leadership could lead to the development of employee-based brand citizenship behavior (Shaari et al., 2015), they could not develop an analogy

TABLE 6 | Indirect effects.

Structural paths	Direct effect (*t*-value)	Indirect effect (*t*-value)	Total effect (*t*-value)	VAF	Interpretation	Results
HRM - > EBKD - > EBBE	0.515 (12.997)	0.180 (3.826)	0.695 (16.222)	26	Partial mediation	H4, Supported
OI - > EBKD - > EBBE	0.310 (8.588)	0.254 (2.798)	0.564 (8.972)	45	Partial mediation	H5, Supported
BL - > EBKD - > EBBE	0.028 (0.662)	0.0350(3.621)	0.322 (0.821)	89	Full mediation	H6, Supported

HRM, human resource management; EBBE, employee brand-based equity; OI, organizational identity; BL, brand leadership, level of significance = 0.05.

between brand leadership and EBBE. In some of the cases, brand leadership provided significant roles in developing consumer-based brand equity.

Consumers' sense of a brand's relative popularity as represented by brand knowledge and consumption is what popularity refers to. Consumers also wanted brand leadership to have a clear vision and to stay connected (Akbar et al., 2021; Khamwon and Sorataworn, 2021). The indirect and mediating role of brand knowledge dissemination proved its significance while mediating between HRM, organizational identity, brand leadership, and EBBE. All these hypotheses were accepted showing that if brand knowledge dissemination prevails in an organization, then it leads to enhanced EBBE. The direct relationship of brand leadership with EBBE was not significant, but mediation of brand knowledge dissemination provided anchorage in this relationship, indicating that with the help of brand knowledge dissemination from leadership to employees, it leads to the development of EBBE.

Employer branding contributes to employee behaviors and attitudes by delivering relevant and meaningful brand information. Furthermore, such psychological and cognitive shifts mean that workers transmit the brand value to customers as planned (Balemba Kanyurhi, 2016). Seemingly, it is critical to disseminate brand knowledge inside the corporate branding. Workers, for instance, are unable to convey an organization's brand identity to consumers lacking brand-related knowledge. Moreover, few stated that "workers may feel directionless, grappling with understanding where, when, or to whom to devote their energy" in the lack of brand awareness (Zulkepli et al., 2015).

Managerial Contributions

Employee-based brand equity facilitates the employee to develop a sense of comparison between perceived cost and benefits which affect them in future. There is certain benefit for developing EBBE among the employees as this study provides valuable insights that organizations develop EBBE among their employee through the brand knowledge dissemination. Brand knowledge dissemination among the employees strengthens the EBBE which provide attractive package for employee for their services. Similarly, management should take valuable insights from this study, improve their HRM practices, and develop organizational identity and brand-oriented leadership which helps to strengthen the EBBE among the employees. Rigorous training and promotions are the effective ways for brand knowledge dissemination among the employees and other stakeholders, which ultimately leads to strengthening the EBBE.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes in the body of the literature in an effective way. EBKD mediates the relationship among HRM practices, organization identity, and brand leadership on employee brand-based equity which shows the importance of HRM practices, organizational identity, and brand leadership for strengthening the brand knowledge dissemination, which leads to EBBE. This study also theoretically contributes by finding that the brand knowledge dissemination among the employees fosters the employee brand-based equity which ultimately helps in reinforcing their organizational brand equity. This study provides valuable insights which help the research scholars and practitioners to further extend this area of study.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Although several important significances are found, this study has some limitations. First, time horizon of this study was cross sectional as data were collected at once so in future studies should adopt longitudinal strategy for data collection. Second, this study adopts convenience sampling for data collection which may raise the issue for generalization of study, so future studies should adopt any rigorous sampling technique for data collection. Using self-reporting measures may also cause issue of biasness, polarity, and other motives among such measures. In order to subjugate these limitations, future research can opt for qualitative approach using interviews or can implement triangulation techniques for behavioral observations. Future studies can add some more constructs for the completion of study. Future studies can obtain data from multiple sectors to assess the generalizability of the model. Moreover, brand knowledge management can be added in the model as mediator or moderator.

CONCLUSION

One belt, one road initiative has been implemented during the second decade of 2000. The core objective of this initiative is economic integration, increasing China's commercial viability, and creating opportunities for local businesses to become internalized. China's ambition is to develop the world's biggest campaign to showcase business and financial links with the entire world under its auspices. However, Chinese firms and businesses may be exposed to several challenges of internalization. In this

scenario, effective HRM is playing a vital role in addressing the local and international issues faced by the organization. The novel contribution of this current research is to explore the internalization challenges faced at the organizational level due to the one belt, one road initiative. Drawing on the resource-based view theory, this study holds the view that effective HRM practices, organizational identity, and brand leadership are the strategic resources for any organization which helps them to create employee brand-based equity. This study also explores the indirect effect of brand knowledge dissemination among the HRM practices practice, organizational identity, and brand leadership on employee brand-based equity. The results of this study demonstrate that HRM practices and organizational identity have a direct influence on employee brand-based equity. However, the direct impact of brand leadership on the employee brand-based equity was found insignificant. Moreover, the results reveal that brand knowledge dissemination mediates the relationship between brand leadership and employee brand-based equity which depicts that brand leadership indirectly impacts brand-based equity through brand knowledge dissemination. Brand knowledge dissemination also mediates the relationship between HRM practice and organizational identity on employee brand-based equity. It is suggested from the finding of this study that organization management and policymakers should develop a rigorous strategy to ensure effective HRM practices. Organizational identity develops among the employees through conducting seminars and training. Knowledge management practices should be implemented in the organization to foster brand knowledge dissemination in the organizational environment.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

XW was conceived and designed the concept, collected the data, wrote the manuscript, and read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Social and Moral Practices of the Organizations and Employee-Based Brand Equity: Female Digital Labor Perspective

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This study investigates the role of socially responsible management as a significant determining factor for employees' morale engagement (EME), employee vitality (EV), and employee-based brand equity (EBBE). Human resource management policies and strategies are important for addressing the interests of the employees and boosting the overall effectiveness of the organization. To examine this, this study analyzes the role of socially responsible management and organizational morality on EME with the mediation of EV. Also, the study examines the role of EME in EBBE. To conduct this study, the data were obtained from 310 female employees working in software houses from home in China. The sampling technique used in the study is purposive sampling. A partial least square structural equation modeling technique is used to analyze the data of the study. The study found that socially responsible management has a positive effect on both EME and EV. The study also reveals that organizational morality has a positive impact on EME and consequently impacts the EBBE in a positive way. The results of the mediation analysis show that EV mediates the relationship between socially responsible management and EME. The study provides practical implications, explaining the strategies and policies that can be adopted by the HR department of the organization to boost employee interests. The study also provides some limitations and future recommendations, such as sample size, the context of the study, and adding new variables to the existing framework.

Keywords: socially responsible management, organizational morality, employee vitality, employees' moral engagement, employee-based brand equity

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INTRODUCTION

Employees are the most important stakeholders in a service brand. They work as internal ambassadors for the branding of the organization. Branding of service firms is largely dependent on brand commitment. Brand commitment is developed through the experience and contacts of the employees in an organization. Such experience and contacts of the employees also shape the employees' personal views, emotions, and behaviors (Brexendorf and Kernstock, 2007). These experiences also led to the development of employee-based brand equity (EBBE), which was proposed by King et al. (2013). EBBE is defined as employees' constructive brand behaviors that are derived from their brand knowledge. These behaviors are consistent with the brand identity's

desired behavior. According to literature, a company's EBBE is shaped through reductions in recruitment expenditures, enhancement of employees' performance, and the generation of more revenue. Therefore, EBBE is an essential issue for further research in the disciplines of branding and internal brand management (Lee et al., 2019).

Employees are the internal stakeholders of a company due to the fact that they take part in shaping the company's values. This is a crucial element in internal branding as the continuous transmission of the brand message to consumers is improbable without it (Helm et al., 2016). Internal branding progress depends on internal stakeholders' synchronization with the company's values. It also helps in assessing the products and consumers' behaviors. Consumers' experience with brand messages remains ineffective without employees' congruence with the organization's values (Du Preez et al., 2017). These organizational values to develop EBBE come from certain organizational management activities. In this study, it is assumed that EBBE may be developed through certain practices such as socially responsible management, organizational morality (OM), employee vitality (EV), and employees' moral engagement (EME). These have been explored in different ways in the past, but their possible role in EBBE is proposed in this study.

Employee engagement is considered as a contributor to EBBE. It refers to a person's moral connection to the company they work for. This is demonstrated by the worker's commitment, outreach, discretionary endeavors, expertise, abilities, and competencies (Tamunomiebi et al., 2020). Morally engaged employees are those who function with enthusiasm and have a greater bond with their employer. Employees are responsible for driving creativity and propelling the firm forward (Tamunomiebi et al., 2020). Engaged employees who perform efficiently are more creative than others. They are more inclined toward their organizations and have a desire to continue their jobs in their organizations. They have higher levels of personal wellbeing and consider their employment to be more reasonable than everyone else's (Jiang and Men, 2015).

Engaged employees remain in the organization longer and continue to develop new and better approaches to provide considerable value to the company. Employee engagement entails putting in physical, mental, and psychological effort at job at the same time (Kahn, 1990). Employee engagement gets a moral support when employees start believing that their companies have started paying attention to economic as well as environmental issues. Since such socially responsible management efforts are virtuous, they can help them find significance in their occupations and in the functioning of the company (Afsar et al., 2020). Employee engagement is difficult to achieve, yet it is incredibly valuable for businesses. For example, in the United States, less than 33% of employees think that they are engaged in their work, and the scenario is comparable with many other countries (Farndale and Murrer, 2015).

It is becoming equally important to consider what motivates employees at their jobs. The managers are looking for new and effective ways to boost employee moral engagement (Knight et al., 2017). Although a number of individual and organizational factors have been recognized as having an impact on employee moral engagement, the impact of socially responsible management has not been studied before on EME (Afsar et al., 2020). Therefore, this study tries to fill this gap. One of the most significant company resources is the human aspect (i.e., the employee group). As employees of organizations are treated under human resource management (HRM), it becomes an important component in the organizational brand equity dimension. HRM is commonly regarded as a critical component in attaining a competitive edge at the organizational level. HRM has been shown to have a positive impact on organizational performance and efficiency by influencing employee behavior and work attitudes (Voorde and Beijer, 2015).

Various investigations have looked into the influence of HR practices on employee work outcomes during the past few decades. HR practices were found to be positively related to employee behavior and work attitudes in the majority of these investigations (Vanhala and Ritala, 2016). There are certain other HR practices which may influence the EME, e.g., socially responsible management (SRM). Shen and Jiuhua Zhu (2011) popularized the notion of SRM. This SRM includes recruitment efforts and the preservation of socially responsible workers. SRM offers training on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and considers employees' performance outcomes when contemplating promotional offers, performance appraisals, and rewards. SRM also helps in providing excellent wages and working conditions to the employees (Shen and Benson, 2016).

Internal stakeholders are more likely to approve this form of HRM practice (e.g., employee groups). A lot of studies have also looked into the impact of such HR practices on employee performance, which could lead to the development of EBBE (Newman et al., 2016; Shen and Benson, 2016). As indicated by Abdelmotaleb and Saha (2020), SRM is the type of CSR practices, which are directed toward the employees of organizations. It is obvious that such management practices lead to manage employees' performance at an organizational level. The majority of the current investigations on socially responsible management have focused on determining how these practices affect the attitudes of external stakeholders, including consumers, authorities, and commodity markets. This kind of management of the company and its impact on the company's performance remain largely unknown (del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022).

Enterprises can use a variety of socially responsible management approaches and give vital significance to employees who engage in organizational productivity. Enterprises implement socially responsible practices that influence the financial planning process, knowledge, and culture. Using social responsibility activities, like creating fluid interactions, helps the organization develop trust and engage employees effectively (Blanco-Gonzalez et al., 2020). Another aspect of EME is influenced by OM. Morality is an attribute that encourages an employee to be on time when expected. This is possibly achieved through OM, which has an impact on every employee.

Morally focused organizations do not take part in any of the corrupt practices. Such organizations do not get involved in kickbacks after the contracts are awarded to stakeholders. Window dressing, accounting tricks, and off-financial statement activities are discouraged by morally focused organizations to

maintain a favorable and respectable impression on the public. Employee and workplace success are admirable when it comes to ethical integrity and ethical values (Sani, 2018). Morality influences how employees perceive their work and organize their presence or position in the company. The virtue of morality encourages the employees to not violate the norms and practices during a lack of monetary compensation. It is crucial to remember how workplace behavioral morals and conduct have an impact on employees' personal bonding with their company and the activities they take part in to support the company's success.

Employees show more involvement if their workplace morals and professional ethics are upheld. They show commitment, devotion, passion, responsibility, and a focus on results and efficiency (Tamunomiebi et al., 2020). Organizational morality is characterized as the norms and requirements of conduct for an organization. It requires employees to perform in accordance with the established behavioral practices and regulations in order to enhance the organization's overall good. Morality claims all employees' lifestyles more than the law does, and it takes precedence over personal employee interests. Workers have basic responsibilities and obligations to the company. The failure of workers to follow the correct behavior in the workplace necessitates the establishment of a morality at work framework (Sani, 2018; Tamunomiebi et al., 2020).

There has been a dearth of research regarding OM and EME (Tamunomiebi et al., 2020), which paves the way to explore the gap. Therefore, this research tried to assess this possible relationship. There are certain other factors, which may have an impact on employees' engagement leading, to the development of EBBE, e.g., physical strength of the employees, such as vitality. Scholars have been paying more attention to employee sentiments of vitality at work in recent years. It is crucial to understand what elements influence EV at work since a vitalized person has better mental and physical health. Health-related attributes are key factors in dealing with and overcoming organizational difficulties and challenges. Greater efficiencies in dealing with work challenges are related to a greater level of vitality.

Workers that are more vitalized have stronger emotional energy and a stronger degree of mental liveliness, making them more proactive at work (Jahanshahi et al., 2019). This helps employees and their colleagues in having a more pleasant work atmosphere. There are various empirical investigations that support the relevance of vitality to jobs. Vitalized employees are far more efficient, innovative, and motivated to work and have a favorable impact on customer satisfaction. Employees who are less energized, on the contrary, are likely to perform poorly. In general, the low extent of vitality inside an organization may lead to higher levels of long-term desire to quit (Tummers et al., 2018; Jahanshahi et al., 2019).

In recent times, research has been conducted on the impact of employees' vitality in the context of physically dangerous workplaces like war zones, but no one has tried to explore the impact of employees' vitality on the engagement of employees. This also posed a gap in research studies. It allowed us to evaluate the mediating role of EV between socially responsible management, OM, EME, and EBBE. This research tries to combine all these aspects of developing EBBE for organizations. For this purpose, this study looks into the possible direct associations between SRM and organizational moral engagement, leading to EBBE.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

This study is supported by virtue ethics theory (Kaptein, 2008), which supports the notion of OM. Organizational morality is a set of ethical virtues and the ethical culture of the organizations, which can influence the employees regarding their moral engagement with the organization and ultimately influence EBBE. Even though there has been a gradual growth in interest in the issue, empirical studies of virtue ethics within business ethics or morality research have been rather restricted. Some more comprehensive utilization of the theory in actual conditions is urgently required (Dawson, 2015). This theory provides the basis for shaping organizational ethical virtues. These virtues have been about continuously practicing, improving, and revamping OM from an organizational perspective, not only listing features or traits (Chun, 2005).

The circumstances, customs, and practices of organizational conduct shaping the ethically sustainable behavior of employees are referred to as OM. Using virtue-ethics theory, Kaptein (2008) claims that an organization's morality is based on organizational ethical virtues that encourage individuals to behave ethically. Socially responsible management in organizations is a type of HRM, and to obtain competitive advantage of any firm, HRM plays a key role (Shen and Jiuhua Zhu, 2011). It has an impact on organizational performance through influencing staff attitudes and behaviors, such as EME. Therefore, such socially responsible management practices get support from attribution theory (Shen and Jiuhua Zhu, 2011).

This study also gets support from two more underlying theories in the context of socially responsible management, OM, and EME for developing EBBE. Social exchange theory and equity theory have provided foundations to similar studies in past (Tamunomiebi et al., 2020). Social exchange theory and Adams' equity theory are used to explain the link between corporate morality and EME (Adams, 1963; Cook et al., 2013). Improved engagement, from these beliefs, can only be achieved if the social exchange among firms and workers is equal and fair. Workers are more willing to connect to the business with more moral engagement if they believe that the organization is committed to a code of ethics (morality), ethical perceptions, and behaviors.

Furthermore, management serves as a role model for employees, helping them to promote company goals and objectives by demonstrating excellent ethical behavior. As a result, OM is capable of having an impact on employee moral involvement. Employees and organizational socially responsible management would have more confidence in such an ethical environment, which would strengthen their commitment to

their organization and work (Tamunomiebi et al., 2020). This study also gets a theoretical support from the cognitive evaluation theory of Deci and Ryan (1985), according to which employees get insights from their surroundings and, based on this information, mold their energy level. Such energy levels are important for their vitality to work in organizations. Similar studies like Huang and Chen (2021) got support for the backing of EV as a mediator. So, this study also looked into the mediating role of employee loyalty based on this theory.

Socially Responsible Management, Employee Vitality, and Employees' Moral Engagement

Socially responsible management is characterized as CSR oriented toward employees. Several studies have been undertaken over the last decade to determine the connection between employee impressions of SRM, employee behaviors, and work practices (Shen and Benson, 2016). Shen and Zhang (2019), for example, looked into the relationship between SRM and promotion of employees for the perception of CSR. Perception of SRM among employees and CSR showed a linkage among themselves (Shen and Zhang, 2019). Shen and Jiuhua Zhu (2011) found that SRM had a substantial positive relationship with employee commitment in a sample of 784 managers and employees in two manufacturing enterprises in China.

Kundu and Gahlawat (2015) revealed that perceptions of employees toward SRM were linked positively with job satisfaction in a study of 563 workers in different industries in India. Job satisfaction seemed to have a full mediating influence on the association between SRM and employee turnover intention, according to the findings of their study. Furthermore, through the mediation of employees' organizational identity, Shen and Benson (2016) discovered that SRM perceptions interacted with perceived organizational support to influence employee task performance on extra-role assisting behavior. Perceptions of employees about SRM were found to be a significant antecedent of work attitudes and behaviors in several studies (Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2020).

Understanding the antecedents and determinants of employee engagement, which include socially responsible management, has been a major focus of scholarly work on employee engagement taken from human resources, strategic planning, and marketing publications (Stephanie and Gustomo, 2015). A research citing a lot of investigations has identified that focusing on CSR practices in the form of socially responsible management of employees has produced significant results (Duthler and Dhanesh, 2018). Such practices of SRM could be utilized further to evaluate the behaviors of employees such as their vitality at workplace and moral engagement with their organizations. It is also assumed that SRM could influence EME, which could develop EBBE in the organizations as an internal management approach. Therefore, based on this supporting literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H_1: Socially responsible management has a positive effect on employee's moral engagement.

H_3: Socially responsible management positively affects employee vitality.

Organizational Morality, Employee Vitality, and Employees' Moral Engagement

The extent to which organizations are perceived by their respective employees to maintain universal moral ideals of integrity, honesty, and reliability is referred to as OM (Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2020). Previous study has focused on morality as a collective attribute (Shadnam et al., 2020). Workers are extremely driven to accomplish what is moral, according to previous studies, and they prefer to associate with moral groups and organizations (Ellemers and Van der Toorn, 2015). According to Ellemers and Van der Toorn (2015), firms should work to improve their moral image in order to recruit, inspire, and retain personnel. A few studies have looked into the relationship between organizational and cultural qualities, as well as employee perceptions of OM.

The normal rules of conduct and behaviors anticipated for employees within the organization are known as OM or workplace ethics. At work, the organization and its employees are required to display morals and behaviors that are sufficient to meet the needs of people (Kaptein, 2008). The relationship between organizational culture and perceived OM has been explored in the past, and culturally specific features were found to have a significant impact on employees' perceptions of OM (Racelis, 2010). Employee impressions of a firm's CSR initiatives on OM were investigated by Ellemers and Van der Toorn (2015). They discovered that corporate ethical activity in the context of ecological management and community engagement had a beneficial impact on OM perception.

According to Cohen et al. (2014), OM or personal integrity are standards of normative ethics, damaging acts that are broadly defined as markers of moral or ethical attitude/behavior. Organizational morality, in this context, refers to the appropriate standards defining what is proper and improper in the workplace, which employees of the organization should follow in order to run successful businesses. Every employee in the organization has basic tasks, duties, and obligations to the company. There are a few things that employees have to do and many others that they have to avoid. This indicates that organizations have a moral worth that governs how employees perform tasks and roles. This also includes employee-to-employee, employee-to-management, and management-to-shareholder interactions, as well as the firm's ties with customers, suppliers, and dealers, as well as the general public. All of these organizational interactions are governed by workplace ethics (Hough et al., 2015).

Employee moral engagement, which is defined as employees' emotional attachment to the company and their willingness to contribute their fair share to the company's success, could be influenced by a variety of factors. Employee engagement is strongly linked to OM and organizational ethics. Employees would be more engaged morally if the company or workplace had

a clear moral and ethical code (Kaptein, 2013). Employee moral involvement is strongly correlated with a decent code of practice and OM in the workplace. Studies have shown that this is true (Kaptein, 2013; Cohen et al., 2014). Employee vitality pertains to an employee's state of positive alertness and energy in relation to his or her teammates at work in this study. Vitality has long been seen as a key indicator of an employee's psychological and physical wellbeing (Garg and Sarkar, 2020).

Elevated levels of independence, the ability to participate in organizational decision-making activity, and good quality cooperation were discovered to be essential organizational management practices for boosting EV in this line of research (Tummers et al., 2015). Employees who are intrinsically motivated have a greater sense of vitality in the profession. As a result, they are more engaged at work and more innovative at work. Organizational morality has been studied in the context of work engagement by the employees, which allowed us to find associations between employees' attributes such as EV and EME with the organizations. So, this study postulates the following hypotheses:

H_2: Organizational morality positively influences employees' moral engagement.

H_4: Organizational morality has a positive effect on employee vitality.

Mediating Role of Employee Vitality

Perceptions of vitality relate to an employee's condition of pleasant alertness and energy in relation to his or her teammates at work in this study. Employee vitality has long been seen as a key indicator of an employee's psychological and physical wellbeing (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). Numerous external and internal elements are essential to improve such aspects in the organization, according to the literature (Garg and Sarkar, 2020). Effective interpersonal interactions among colleagues are crucial for boosting vitality at work (Carmeli, 2009). According to the findings of a recent study conducted with employees of a Dutch dairy firm, having a decent work–life harmony and leading a healthy lifestyle improves the feelings of vitality in the workplace (Tummers et al., 2015).

Certain HRM techniques were discovered to be crucial for boosting EV throughout this line of research: Strong levels of confidence, the ability to participate in corporate decision-making, and high-quality teamwork are all desirable (Scheppingen et al., 2014; Tummers et al., 2018). Employees that are intrinsically motivated have a greater sense of vitality in the organization. As a result, they are more engaged at work and more innovative in their work (Strijk et al., 2012; Xie et al., 2020). Jansen (2004) discovered that increased levels of vitality among employees enhance the organizational transition process in this regard. Moreover, vitalized employees have greater mental fortitude in the workplace, which is a key component in dealing with obstacles and challenges.

Previous studies have mostly concentrated on exploring the implications of EV (Tummers et al., 2018). Tummers et al. (2018) looked at how work factors affect EV. The key job features, namely, management assignment transmission and work engagement, were found to be positively associated with EV at the workplace. Despite the fact that positive employee affective experiences in the workplace are thought to lead to increased EV (Ryan et al., 2010), little attention has been paid to its role as a mediator between specific management elements of employees in businesses. Very limited research in the past has been carried out to find the mediating role of EV but proved its significance among certain organizational factors (Kark and Carmeli, 2009). Therefore, the authors suggested that it could mediate the relationship between socially responsible management, OM, EME, and EBBE.

H_5: Employee vitality mediates the relationship between socially responsible management and employees' moral engagement.

H_6: Employee vitality mediates the relationship between OM and employee's moral engagement.

Employees' Moral Engagement and Employee-Based Brand Equity

Employees who are engaged have a strong relationship with their firm and invest not only in their individual responsibilities but also in the organization as a whole. Over time, those who are involved with the institutions with which they are affiliated or the firm for which they work outperform their colleagues in regards to productivity, and they constantly function as company advocates (Sendawula et al., 2018). Employee engagement and commitment to the company would always increase performance and greatly enhance the company's profits. Individuals who are totally engaged in work have higher self-efficacy and have a beneficial impact on their health, which leads to the enhanced active support for business. Employees in this group consider themselves to be actual participants in the organization (Pandita and Ray, 2018).

Employee engagement in organizations is influenced by a number of things. The job nature, a job with clear purpose and meaning, career progression, reward and recognition opportunities at work, constructing appreciation and confident connections, open lines of communication processes that encourage governance, and coaching opportunities are all examples of these considerations. The inference is that for every engagement, there is still a key cause or set of reasons that either excite or demoralize employees, resulting in a lack of engagement (Sendawula et al., 2018). According to Jena et al. (2018), who performed a study in various countries and across industry sectors, passionate and dedicated employees are in the minority. State participation, once again, boosts productivity and leads to company profitability.

It is established that morally engaged employees with their organizations have impacts on the organizational performance in the form of turnovers and productivity. The leading concern of this research lies in the development of EBBE. It is also well established that more engaged employees with their organizations have the ability to perform well in any given circumstance. While EBBE is also a dimension of internal

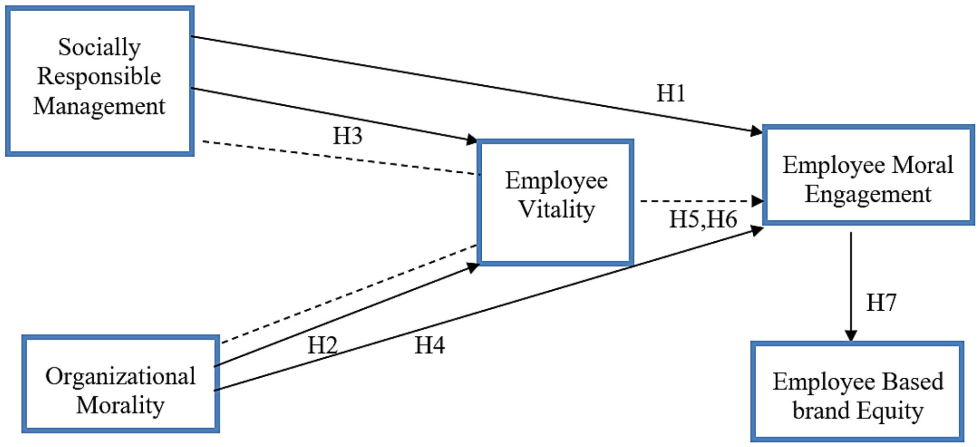

FIGURE 1 | Theoretical framework.

TABLE 1 | Demographic analysis.

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (years)		
20–30	74	23.87
31–40	127	40.97
41–50	65	20.97
Above 50	44	14.19
Education		
Bachelors	79	25.48
Masters	143	46.13
Ph.D. and others	88	28.39
Organizational tenure (years)		
Less than 1	72	23.23
1–3	112	36.13
4–6	87	28.06
More than 6	39	12.58

N = 310.

brand management within organizations, it is believed that employees who are morally engaged to their organizations could provide a tool of internal management for developing EBBE. This has been developed on the notion derived from certain previous investigations (Gupta and Shaheen, 2018; Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

> **H_7:** Employees' moral engagement positively affects employee-based brand equity.

Based on the above literature and hypothesis, the conceptual model (**Figure 1**) has been established.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a deductive approach to examine the hypotheses of this study. The quantitative research design was chosen to carry out this study. The hypotheses were developed to examine the influence of independent variables on outcome variables. Reliable results were obtained as the study used a quantitative research design, and this research design was found to be beneficial in eliminating the biases. Data collection was carried out using a self-administrated survey. Data rationality was obtained by keeping the questionnaire precise and clear so that the respondents could conveniently fill it out. Female employees of the software houses were the target population of the study. The female employees were specifically targeted to understand the stance of female employees regarding the social and moral practices observed in the organizations considering their gender and to what extent do these practices contribute to the EV and their engagement in their jobs. For this purpose, the female employees who were working from home were approached to participate in the survey. The desirability bias of the participants has been controlled through adopting the current methodology. The authors met the potential female employees working online from home before taking appointments to explain the study and taking permission from the potential participants to participate. The language of the questionnaire was English, which is an international language and understandable in China. The questionnaire was distributed with a cover letter where the purpose of the study was explained, and the method to solve the questionnaire was explained to avoid misunderstandings in the survey. The participants have been assured to keep the responses confidential, and they will be used for the research purpose only. Moreover, the responses obtained from the questionnaire were natural as the respondents were informed that there were no wrong or right answers.

A careful sample estimate of 500 was made based on the study conducted by Wolf et al. (2013), who have investigated what parameters affect the statistical power, parameter estimate biases, and overall statistical analysis and found that a sample size between 30 and 460 cases is found to produce meaningful trends and patterns among the parameters using structural equation modeling (SEM). This study used the time lag method for data collection (Bashir et al., 2021).

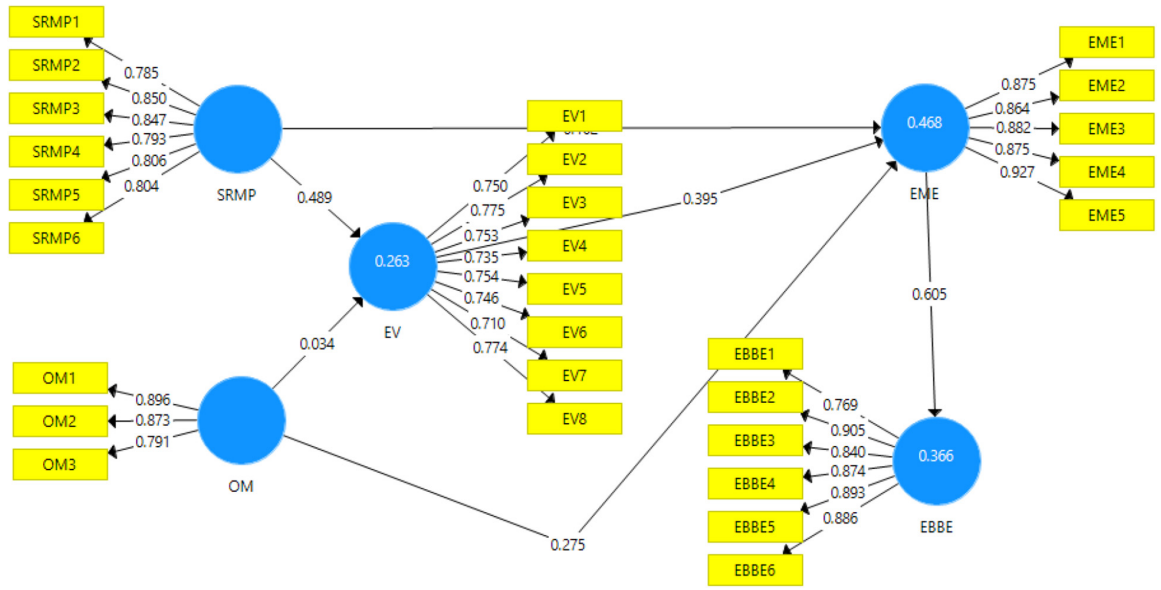

FIGURE 2 | Output of measurement model. SRMP, socially responsible management; OM, organizational morality; EV, employee vitality; EME, employees' morale engagement; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

The questionnaire was divided into two waves. In the first wave (W-1), the data on the independent variables of the study were collected by distributing 500 questionnaires. The questionnaires were collected after 2 weeks, and the number of questionnaires received was 412. With the gap of 40 days, the second wave (W-2) of the data collection was conducted by distributing 412 questionnaires to the respondents of the first wave. After a time period of 2 weeks, 337 filled questionnaires were obtained, but the usable questionnaires were 310, which met the sample size criteria mentioned in literature (Wolf et al., 2013). The rest of the questionnaires were discarded as they were improper and incomplete. The rate of usable response was 81.58%. Statistical software was used for data analysis.

The target population of the study was female employees working in software houses from home; therefore, the data were collected from the target population. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample from the whole population. This type of sampling technique is suitable for this study because it requires less time and is less expensive to acquire data from the most relevant respondents (Etikan et al., 2015), because the researchers needed the female employees working online from home. Therefore, this purposive technique for selecting the sample was the most appropriate. This study has a sample size of 310. The unit of analysis for this study was the female employees working in software houses from home in China; therefore, the data were collected from the target population.

Measurement

A 5-point Likert scale was used to obtain data for all the variables. The scales were adapted from the past researches (Carmeli and Spreitzer, 2009; King and Grace, 2010; Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2020). The number of items in each variable, along with the items, has been explained as follows.

Socially Responsible Management

Socially responsible management consists of six items, which were adopted by Abdelmotaleb and Saha (2020). The sample items include "my company considers employee social performance in promotions," "my company considers employee social performance in performance appraisals," and "my company relates employee social performance to rewards and compensation."

Organizational Morality

Organizational morality consists of three items, which were adopted from Abdelmotaleb and Saha (2020). The sample items include "When I think about my organization, I feel that the name of this organization is (i) honest, (ii) sincere, and (iii) trustworthy."

Employee Vitality

Employee vitality consists of eight items, which were adopted from Carmeli and Spreitzer (2009). The sample items include "I feel active and energetic at work," "I have high energy to complete my work," "during the working day I feel I am full of energy," "I have the energy to successfully do my job," etc.

Employees' Morale Engagement

Employee's morale engagement consists of 5 items, which were adopted from Carmeli and Spreitzer (2009). The sample items include "I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose," "I am enthusiastic about my job," "My job inspires me," "I am proud of the work that I do," and "To me, my job is challenging."

TABLE 2 | Model assessment (direct model).

			Construct reliability and validity		
Factor loadings		**VIF**	**α**	**Composite reliability**	**AVE**
Socially responsible management					
SRMP1	0.785	2.645			
SRMP2	0.850	2.859			
SRMP3	0.747	3.525	0.831	0.846	0.644
SRMP4	0.793	2.408			
SRMP5	0.706	2.166			
SRMP6	0.804	2.262			
Organizational morality					
OM1	0.896	2.017			
OM2	0.873	1.986	0.816	0.890	0.730
OM3	0.791	1.598			
Employee vitality					
EV1	0.750	1.938			
EV2	0.775	2.751			
EV3	0.753	2.389			
EV4	0.735	1.679			
EV5	0.754	2.763	0.891	0.911	0.562
EV6	0.746	2.708			
EV7	0.710	2.507			
EV8	0.774	3.277			
Employee moral engagement					
EME1	0.875	3.109			
EME2	0.764	2.651			
EME3	0.882	3.079	0.830	0.847	0.683
EME4	0.875	2.950			
EME5	0.827	4.890			
Employee based brand equity					
EBBE1	0.769	1.812			
EBBE2	0.805	4.033			
EBBE3	0.840	2.669	0.831	0.846	0.644
EBBE4	0.874	3.328			
EBBE5	0.793	3.926			
EBBE6	0.786	3.295			

SRMP, socially responsible management; OM, organizational morality; EV, employee vitality; EME, employees' morale engagement; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; VIF, variance inflation factor; α, Cronbach's alpha; AVE, average variance extracted.

Employee-Based Brand Equity

Employee-based brand equity consists of 6 items, which were adopted from King and Grace (2010). The sample items include "I really care about the fate of the organization I work for" and "My values are similar to those of the organization I work for."

Statistical Tool

This study tested the proposed hypotheses of the study using SEM using Smart PLS 3.3.3. By using this software, path models were developed, and through these path models, the small data sets were analyzed in a short time span (Hair et al., 2017). Smart PLS uses two main models, i.e., the measurement model and the structural model for data analysis.

Demographic Profile

The demographic profile of the participants in the study is shown in **Table 1**. Three demographic traits were measured, i.e., age, education, and organizational tenure. It can be observed that 23.87% of participants were aged between 20 and 30 years, 40.97% were aged between 31 and 40 years, 20.97% were aged between 41 and 50 years, and 14.19% were aged above 50 years. Moreover, it can also be observed that 79 participants had a bachelor's education, and they comprised 25.48% of the total sample. A total of 143 participants had a master's education, and they made up 46.13% of the entire sample, whereas, 88 individuals had Ph.D. or other qualifications, and they comprised 28.39% of the sample size. Furthermore, 72 participants had an organizational tenure of less than 1 year. A total of 112 had a tenure ranging between 1 and 3 years, 87 had tenure of 4–6 years, and 39 participants had an organizational tenure of more than 6 years.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Measurement Model

The outcome of the measurement model is depicted in **Figure 2**. The figure demonstrates the degree to which the predictor variables influence the outcome variables of this study.

The detailed assessment of the measurement model (direct model) is shown in **Table 2**. It includes the values of factor loadings, variance inflation factor (VIF), Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) that were obtained against each of the variables. Jordan and Spiess (2019) posit that the minimum threshold value for factor loading should be above 0.60. The table shows that the values of factor loadings lie between 0.710 and 0.927 thus satisfying this assumption. Moreover, VIF detects collinearity within the proposed model. According to Hair et al. (2014), the outer VIF values should be below 5. It can be observed that all outer VIF values ranged between 1.598 and 4.890. As a result, it can be deduced that there was no collinearity within the proposed model.

Table 2 presents the construct reliability and validity. According to Hair et al. (2017), a construct is said to be reliable if the corresponding value of Cronbach's alpha is above 0.70. Moreover, a value of above 0.70 for composite reliability is regarded as reliable (Peterson and Kim, 2013). The table shows that the values of both of these indicators were above 0.70, which means that the items of the constructs were reliable. Furthermore, the presence of convergent validity was also checked through the values of AVE. According to Dash and Paul (2021), the AVE values should be above 0.50. It can be seen that all values of AVE satisfy this assumption. Convergent validity exists within the proposed model.

The outcome of the tests that were carried out to determine the presence of discriminant validity can be observed in **Table 3**. The Fornell and Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio are the two major tests that are used to determine the presence of discriminant validity. Discriminant validity tells us whether or not one variable is distinct and unique from another variable. According to Ab Hamid et al. (2017), the value

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity.

Fornell–Larcker criterion						Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio					
Constructs	**EBBE**	**EME**	**EV**	**OM**	**SRMP**	**Constructs**	**EBBE**	**EME**	**EV**	**OM**	**SRMP**
EBBE	0.863					EBBE					
EME	0.605	0.885				EME	0.646				
EV	0.626	0.581	0.750			EV	0.670	0.612			
OM	0.340	0.538	0.377	0.854		OM	0.386	0.605	0.424		
SRMP	0.466	0.557	0.513	0.703	0.815	SRMP	0.483	0.585	0.530	0.849	

N = 310.
SRMP, socially responsible management; OM, organizational morality; EV, employee vitality; EME, employees' morale engagement; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

of the HTMT ratio must be lower than 0.90. The table shows that all values of HTMT successfully met this assumption. On the contrary, the underlying assumption for the Fornell and Larcker criterion is that the value at the top of each column should be greater than the values below it (Henseler et al., 2015). It can be seen that this assumption was also met. Hence, it can be deduced that discriminant validity existed within the proposed model.

The *R*-square values for EBBE, EME, and EV are depicted in **Table 4**. According to Hair et al. (2017), the sustainability of the model is explained by the *R*-square values, which should be close to 0.50. It can be observed that the *R*-square values for EBBE, EME, and EV are 0.364, 0.462, and 0.258. These values suggest that the proposed model is sustainable. Moreover, the values of *Q*-square can also be seen in **Table 4**. The *Q*-square values depict the predictive relevance of the proposed model. The values of *Q*-square should be greater than 0 (Hair et al., 2017). All the values of *Q*-square successfully meet this assumption. Therefore, it can be concluded that the proposed model had significant predictive relevance.

TABLE 4 | *R*-square values for the variables.

	***R*-square**	***Q*-square**
EBBE	0.364	0.248
EME	0.462	0.341
EV	0.258	0.129
OM		0.108
SRMP		0.112

N = 310.
SRMP, socially responsible management; OM, organizational morality; EV, employee vitality; EME, employees' morale engagement; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

TABLE 5 | Collinearity statistics (inner-VIF values).

	EBBE	**EME**	**EV**	**OM**	**SRMP**
EBBE					
EME	1.000				
EV		1.357			
OM		1.976	1.974		
SRMP		2.299	1.974		

N = 310.
SRMP, socially responsible management; OM, organizational morality; EV, employee vitality; EME, employees' morale engagement; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

The collinearity statistics are shown in **Table 5**. Collinearity is examined through the inner VIF values of the constructs. As per Sarstedt et al. (2014), the values of inner VIF should be lower than 5. The table shows that all inner VIF values ranged between 1.000 and 2.299. As a result, it is determined that collinearity was not present in the proposed model.

Structural Model

The outcome of the structural model bootstrapping is shown in **Figure 3**. The structural model includes values of *t*-statistics, and the acceptance/rejection of the proposed hypotheses has been assessed through the PLS-SEM bootstrapping technique. For this purpose, a 95% corrected bootstrap approach was undertaken.

The direct effects of the variables are shown in **Table 6**. The significance of the result is assessed using the values of *t*-statistics and *p*-values. According to Johnson (2019), the *t*-statistic value should be greater than 1.96. Moreover, Di Leo and Sardanelli (2020) posited that the *p*-value should be below 0.05. Furthermore, the value of f^2 is a depiction of the effect size. Effect size values close to 1 depict higher strength, whereas those close to 0 depict low or weak strength (Meng and Bari, 2019).

The outcome of the direct relationships is shown in **Table 6**. H1 stated that SRM had a positive effect on EME. The *t*-statistic value is 2.424, and the *p*-value is 0.016, which suggests that H1 has been accepted. The effect size is 0.021, which depicts weak model strength. H2 predicted that OM had a positive effect on EME. The *t*-statistic value and *p*-value are 3.388 and 0.001, respectively. Hence, H2 has also been accepted. The effect size is 0.072, which indicates weak model strength. H3 proposed that SRM had a positive effect on EV. The value of the *t*-statistic is 7.324, and the *p*-value is 0.000. Therefore, H3 has also been accepted. The effect size is 0.164, which suggests weak model strength. H4 posited that OM had a positive effect on EV. The *t*-statistic value and *p*-value are 0.519 and 0.604, respectively. Therefore, H4 has been rejected. Finally, H7 predicted that EME had a positive effect on employee brand-based equity (EBBE). The *t*-statistic value and *p*-value are 12.236 and 0.000, respectively, which indicate that the results are significant. Therefore, H7 has been accepted. The effect size of 0.576 indicates strong model strength.

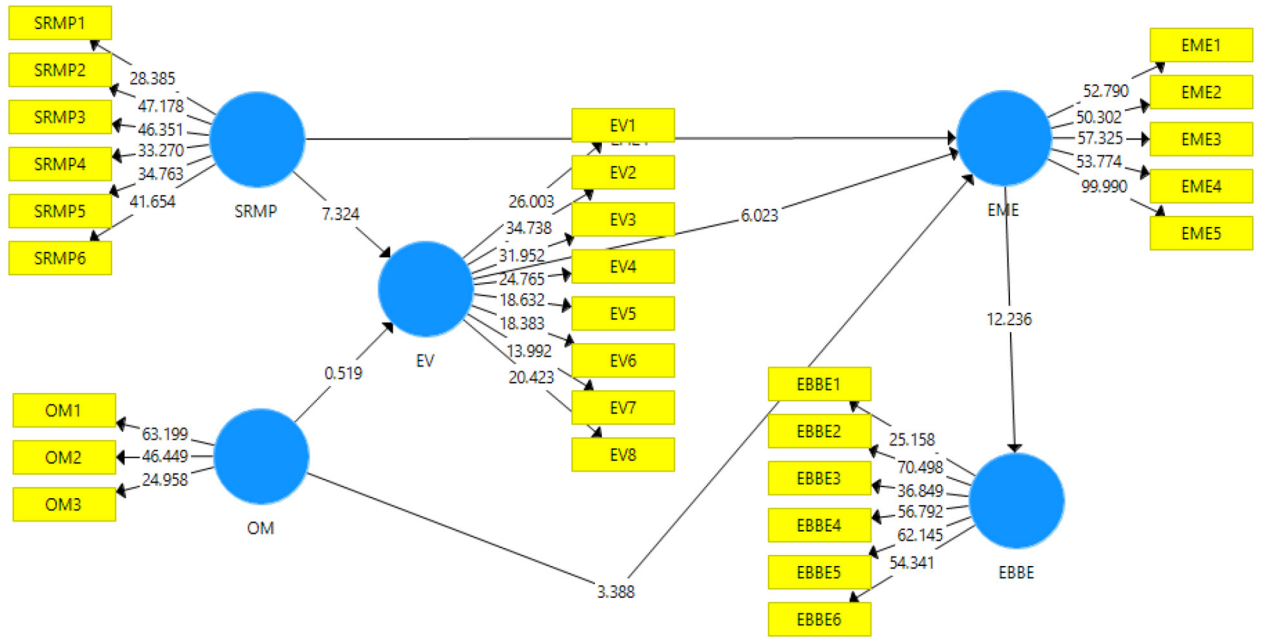

FIGURE 3 | Structural model bootstrapping. SRMP, socially responsible management; OM, organizational morality; EV, employee vitality; EME, employees' morale engagement; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

TABLE 6 | Direct effects of the variable.

Paths	H	O	*M*	SD	*t*-Statistics	Effect size (f^2)	*p*-Value	Results
SRMP → EME	H_1	0.171	0.173	0.070	2.424	0.021	0.016*	*Accepted*
OM → EME	H_2	0.269	0.270	0.079	3.388	0.072	0.001**	*Accepted*
SRMP → EV	H_3	0.499	0.499	0.068	7.324	0.164	0.000**	*Accepted*
OM → EV	H_4	0.044	0.048	0.084	0.519	0.001	0.604	*Rejected*
EME → EBBE	H_7	0.578	0.579	0.047	12.236	0.576	0.000***	*Accepted*

*N = 310, ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.005, *p < 0.05.*
SRMR = 0.085, NFI = 0.753. H, hypothesis; O, original sample; M, sample mean; SD, standard deviation; SRMP, socially responsible management; OM, organizational morality; EV, employee vitality; EME, employees' morale engagement; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

The values of standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and normed fixed index (NFI) are shown in **Table 6**. SRMR and NFI are indicators that are used to assess the fitness of the proposed model. These values should lie between 0 and 1 (Elsayed and Aneis, 2021). It can be observed that the values of SRMR and NFI were 0.085 and 0.753, respectively. Therefore, it can be ascertained that the proposed model was fit for the data.

TABLE 7 | Indirect effects of the variable.

Paths	H	O	*M*	SD	*t*-Statistics	*p*-Value	Results
SRMP→ EV→ EME	H_5	0.197	0.197	0.043	4.537	0.000***	*Accepted*
OM→ EV→ EME	H_6	0.017	0.020	0.034	0.514	0.608**	*Rejected*

*N = 310, ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.005, *p < 0.05.*
H, hypothesis; O, original sample; M, sample mean; SD, standard deviation; SRMP, socially responsible management; OM, organizational morality; EV, employee vitality; EME, employees' morale engagement; EBBE, employee-based brand equity.

The outcome of the indirect effects is shown in **Table 7**. H5 predicted that EV mediates the relationship between SRM and EME. The *t*-statistic value is 4.537, and the *p*-value is 0.000. Hence, H5 has been accepted. Moreover, H6 posited that EV mediates the relationship between OM and EME. The *t*-statistic value and *p*-value are 0.514 and 0.608, respectively. Hence, H6 has been rejected, and it can be concluded that EV does not mediate the relationship between OM and EME.

DISCUSSION

This research has been conducted from the perspective of female digital labor who can work on different digital platforms for organizations. Certain organizational factors, which are socially and morally connected to organizational management, were studied in this research. For social organizational factors, relationships were evaluated between socially responsible management, EV, and EME, which also had an impact on

developing internal brand equity or EBBE. This study also tried to find out the ethical aspects of organizations, such as OM on EV and EME. Moreover, the mediating effects of EV were also tested in this study between social and moral factors of organizational management and EME.

The direct relationship of socially responsible management, which is a type of HRM through CSR, showed significant association with EME and EV. These results indicate that if CSR is fulfilled, and the proper HRM takes place among employees at an organizational level, then it could significantly influence in developing a sense of EME. Previously, some researchers indicated that HRM and CSR are interlinked, and their effects help in boosting organizational productivity and employees' performance (Shen and Benson, 2016). The possible reason for such results lies in the fact that such management at organizational level has a pulse on employees, and practices are conducted for the employees in a directional way.

It is also obvious that SRM is perceived as CSR, which has an impact on the employees. A few investigations in the recent past have explored the association of perceptions of SRM and the performance of employees (Shen and Benson, 2016). Another similar study concluded that SRM could influence the perceptions of employees about CSR (Shen and Zhang, 2019). Similarly, Shen and Jiuhua Zhu (2011) indicated that SRM had a substantial influence on the commitment of employees to their organizations. All these studies proved the significance of SRM and supported our findings about the role of socially responsible management on EME and employees' vitality. The other direct relationships between OM, EV, and EME were also studied in this study, and the results indicated that OM had significant association with EME while it could not influence employees' vitality, which is more of a physical factor associated with employees' health.

The possible reasoning for such results could be presented as the extent of organizations in providing moral measures at organizational level that are related to the well-being of employees. These moral values are conferred upon the functioning of organizations, and employees, in return, feel morally associated with their respective organizations. It is supported by the fact that integrity, honesty, and reliability are the pre-requisites of the functioning at workplaces. All these are referred to as OM (Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2020). Previous research has focused on morality as a collective attribute (Shadnam et al., 2020), and those collective attributes showed positive associations of OM with employees' engagement at workplaces. The association between OM and EV could not prove its worth as vitality indicators are more affiliated with the health of employees and OM had no impact on health-related aspects of employees.

The indirect effects of EV were also tested in this study between socially responsible management, OM, and EME. The relationships between SRM were mediated by the EV, and it helped in boosting EME. This is possible due to the reason that such human resource-based practices influence the behaviors of employees positively. Previously, some of the HRM practices were indicated to be necessary for the vitality of the employees, which led the employees to work efficiently in teams (Scheppingen et al., 2014; Tummers et al., 2018). This kind of performance is required at organizational levels. Therefore, this study shows another level of employees' bond with their organizations. The indirect effects of employees' vitality could not prove their aiding role between OM and EME to their organizations.

This indicates that EV is not related to the moral practices of organizations, and it could also not provide any mediation between OM and EME. Previously, Tummers et al. (2018) looked at how work factors affect EV. These job features focused only on knowledge management, its transfusions, and work-related engagement, and they had an association with employees' vitality. The direct effects of EME showed that it had a significant association with EBBE. As indicated by Sendawula et al. (2018), employees' engagement is related to certain factors at workplaces, which could boost their performance or demoralize them at work. Once employees are morally engaged with their organizations, they could work for the branding of their organizations. It was also supported by Gupta and Shaheen (2018) and Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) stated that morally engaged employees have the potential to develop EBBE.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the environmental and HRM literature. First, this study examined the role of organization-level variables (such as organizational mobility and socially responsible management) on employee behavior, which has not been analyzed earlier. The existing literature is also enriched by adding a new mediating variable, i.e., EV, in the relationship between socially responsible management and EME and also between organizational mobility and EME. New findings were found between EME and EBBE, which added value to the existing literature. Fewer studies were conducted to examine the relationship between these variables only among female employees, so this study enriched the literature in this regard.

Practical Implications

This study provides several practical implications for HR managers and practitioners who are looking for strategies to enhance social responsibility management and OM within the organization. CSR programs are developed to address the concerns and interests of the external stakeholders; however, these programs do not incorporate the interests of the internal employees. On the basis of the findings obtained from this study, it is significant for organizations to adopt and implement socially responsible management practices, as these practices increase EV, which further boosts both EME and EBBE. Moreover, organizations should put effort in providing CSR training to encourage CSR as a significant organizational value. Human resource managers must conduct performance appraisals to measure the social performance of their employees. Additionally, HR managers must provide promotions and increments to employees who have demonstrated positive social performance. In addition to this, policies must be devised by the management of the organization so that social responsibility can be increased within the organization. When employees feel that OM is high,

the level of EME will be enhanced, thus increasing the success of the organization.

Limitations and Future Directions

In addition to the implications explained above, this study also presents a few limitations, which could be used in future research. This study used a small sample size; therefore, future studies can conduct the study using a larger sample size for generalizing the data to the entire population. Moreover, the present study was conducted on female employees working in software houses from home, thus, future studies can be conducted on both genders, i.e., males and females, in order to examine the results on the male population as well. Future studies can also be conducted on other industries, for example, the banking or hospitality sector. Furthermore, studies can be conducted on other Asian countries or western regions. Another limitation of the study is related to the study variables. This study examined the role of socially responsible management and OM on EME with the mediation of EV. Also, the study examined the role of EME on EBBE. Future studies can use other variables, such as organizational justice, to examine the role of this variable in the present framework.

CONCLUSION

Human resource management plays a significant role in achieving a competitive advantage. HRM devises policies for the employees so that they can effectively perform in the organization. Therefore, this study examined the role of socially responsible management and OM on EME with the mediation of EV. Also, the study examined the role of EME on EBBE. The investigation was conducted on female employees working in software houses from home in China. The study found that socially responsible management has an effect on both EME and EV. The study revealed that OM has an effect on EME, and EME has an impact on EBBE. However, an insignificant relationship was found between OM and EV. The results of the mediation analysis showed that EV mediates the relationship between socially responsible management and EME. However, EV did not mediate the relationship between OM and EME.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Beijing Language and Culture University, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SH: conceptualization, data collection, and writing the draft.

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Brand Knowledge and Organizational Loyalty as Antecedents of Employee-Based Brand Equity: Mediating Role of Organizational Culture

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This study tends to explore the impact of brand knowledge and organizational loyalty under the mediating role of organizational culture on employee-based brand equity (EBBE). For this purpose, employees of the hospitality sector were contacted to collect data through personally administrated questionnaires. Already established scales were used to devise instruments. Data were collected in two waves to minimize the common method bias. In the first wave, a total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 400 were received back, while in the second wave, remaining respondents were approached who have filled the survey in the first wave, and only 320 were received back, from which the partial and incomplete questionnaires were discarded, and at the end, 306 questionnaires were left. These final and completed responses were used for the data analysis and inferential purpose in this study. Collected data have been analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling by using Smart PLS 3 software. The assessment of measurement and structural model indicated a good model fit, and results indicate that EBBE is influenced by organizational loyalty and brand knowledge positively. Moreover, the mediating role of organizational culture has also been proved.

Keywords: employee-based brand equity, organizational loyalty, brand knowledge, organizational culture, hospitality sector

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INTRODUCTION

Brand equity and the value given to a product are the major indicators of commercial success and are considered as the company's most valuable resource (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020), while the literature has suggested that a value may be added by a variety of stakeholder groups, i.e., the bulk of published scientific studies and brand equity from customer or firm's perspective (Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2010; Veloutsou and Guzman, 2017). Workers' importance in fulfilling the marketing goals to different customers (such as clients) is extensively established, especially in the context of services. Staff skills and expertise, for instance, have a crucial impact on consumers' brand experiences and overall brand perceptions (Wallace et al., 2013). However, insufficient research has been conducted on how to improve employee-based brand equity (EBBE) so employees may effectively execute their duty as endorsers (Baker et al., 2014; Helm et al., 2016; Morokane et al., 2016).

Brands are made up of a combination of practical and emotional characteristics. To put it another way, a brand blends practical and emotional values to make a commitment well about brand image. As a result, a brand's success is determined by how well it delivers on its promises. For hospitality, however, delivering value propositions is more difficult. For starters, hospitality services are often performances or experiences that are difficult to evaluate due to their intangible character. As a result, communicating brand benefits to consumers is more complicated (Erkmen, 2018; Dinçer et al., 2020). Furthermore, because consumption and production are inextricably linked, personnel who provide services are frequently mistaken for the service itself (Erkmen, 2018). Finally, uniformity in hospitality services is difficult to attain because service delivery is dependent on personnel performance.

It is well-understood that the contact between staff and customers is critical to the consistent supply of both emotional and functional values. As a result, branding hospitality services takes a different strategy than branding physical commodities. Because hospitality service firms rely significantly on their workers to fulfill the marketing goals, there is a growing worry about how to manage their brand-related behavioral patterns (Andaji Garmaroudi et al., 2021; Buhalis and Park, 2021; Robinot et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021). Resultantly, internal branding has already been brought to the branding literature, which is concerned with matching staff activities with brand promise (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021; Solakis et al., 2022). Companies may utilize brands as a tool to gain more customers. The value of brands and the need for investment in brands and customers have been acknowledged by business leaders (Lim and Brown-Devlin, 2021; Martillo Jeremías and Polo Peña, 2021).

Consumer-based brand equity is becoming more of a concern, but the role of workers is also becoming more prominent (Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2010). Employees' capacity to execute client expectations is the foundation for building a strong brand and delivering perceived service excellence (King et al., 2013). As the focus of attention changes more and more to employees, experts argue that studying brand equity from the standpoint of employees, dubbed EBBE, is vital (Gounaris, 2006; Mo et al., 2021). Enhancing EBBE helps organizations recruit competent individuals, and workers' skills and experience provide them with a competitive edge. Professionals' identification with enterprises, in contrast, may add to client satisfaction since they connect directly with consumers or customers (Poulis and Wisker, 2016).

The EBBE, as defined by King, is "the unequal influence of brand knowledge on an employee's responsiveness to internal brand management." Moreover, how employees become related to brand values remains a key subject of study. As a result, the notion of brand equity has grown in prominence as a prerequisite for effective internal brand management. In contrast, two widely accepted approaches on brand equity continue to dominate literary works: customer-based brand equity (CBBE) and financial-based brand equity. That is why King and Grace came up with the idea for the third point of view. The authors advocated EBBE in their groundbreaking study, which emphasizes brand expertise as the cornerstone to inside brand-building initiatives (King et al., 2013; Erkmen, 2018). Given the notion's inception and the trend toward that third perspective for brand equity, most research, at present, has focused on the idea theoretically or conceptually (King and Grace, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010; King et al., 2012). Based on this gap, this research focused on identifying the role of brand knowledge on EBBE. Human resource management is becoming a competitive edge in today's business environment.

Unsuitable employees can lead to business failure. Normal employees can keep the firm running and get it to the top, but exceptional employees may take even moderate enterprises to the top. To be successful in the future, corporations must not only hire the finest people but also make them loyal to the business to maintain them (Vardarlier, 2016; Alshraideh et al., 2017; Uzair et al., 2017). Three variables commonly determine organizational loyalty: affiliation with and conviction in the company's aims, values, and goals; proclivity to engage in activities that are profitable first and foremost to the organization; and proclivity to stay and work in the organization (Alshraideh et al., 2017). Walton was one of the first scholars to recognize the importance of loyalty (Walton and Limited, 2006). According to him, an effective performance increases when it shifts from a traditional influence strategy to a loyalty-based approach in employee management (Sokro et al., 2021; Hosseini, 2022).

Rightfully, the level of commitment is a set of techniques to analyze employee behavior and approaches with distinct gaps in the outcomes when used. To put it succinctly, organizational loyalty has a direct impact on occupational efficiency, resulting in lower employee turnover, more efficient resource use, and increased productivity (Armstrong and Kepler, 2018; Reus et al., 2019). The organizational culture component, which evolved from Hofstede's study in the 1970's and 1980's, is based on the conception of culture (Hofstede, 1980). It has become a contentious and significant topic in management study and practice. Organizational culture represents the shared values, conventions, and assumptions inside an organization, according to the concept of culture (Bharadwaj, 2014). Seemingly, organizational culture is ingrained in cultural identity, and in some cases, such as transnational corporations, it may be ingrained in many national cultures. These beliefs, attitudes, and actions of organizational personnel assist them to comprehend how the organization works are referred to as organizational culture (Schneider et al., 2012, 2017; Bataineh et al., 2017).

Organizational climate has been studied before in the context of organizations' performance, but it could have played a mediating role suggested by Schneider et al. (2017) in developing EBBE. Therefore, the author utilized it as a mediator for identifying the connecting link between brand knowledge, organizational loyalty, and EBBE. This research was based on several questions: What could be the antecedents of EBBE in the hospitality sector? How these factors, such as brand knowledge and organizational loyalty, could lead to EBBE? and What driving role, organizational culture could play between antecedents and EBBE? To address these questions, this study explored the relationships of brand knowledge, organizational loyalty, and EBBE. This study also contributed to identify the

shaping role of organizational culture among the relationships of brand knowledge, organizational loyalty, and EBBE.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand knowledge is being used to develop overall brand recognition to the allocation of public consumption patterns, and it is also utilized to put workers' brand-related job behaviors in jeopardy. Similarly, EBBE refers to the employees' identification with the brand. In the literature, there are two viewpoints to describe the employer–employee relationship: social-exchange-based and organizational-identification-premised connections. The social exchange theory (SET), which describes workplace relationships *via* the trade of physical resources, has evolved into a social-exchange-oriented approach (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). In contrast, identification-based relationships are founded here on social identity theory (SIT), which explains employee relationships as a match among personal and corporate identities (Erkmen, 2018). SIT is the foundation of this research. The SIT was used in a variety of settings, including the psychology of consumers, information dissemination, and the connection between sports franchises and their supporters (Dimofte et al., 2014; Mckinley et al., 2014; Ambrose and Schnitzlein, 2017).

The SIT has also been used as the major conceptual framework in the study of a few hospitality researchers. SIT is a core theory in cognitive science that has been used to explain group psychology, interacting, and social perspectives, and it was proposed by Tajfel and Turner (2004). The component of one's self-concept that stems from social groups or groups to which someone belongs, as well as the significance and psychological value linked with affiliation to an organization, is referred to as social identity. It is the aspect of self-identity that is mostly generated from belonging to a group (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). People tend to associate and link themselves to diverse social groups as a way of selecting self-identity and a feeling of belonging, according to the SIT. The personal self has been founded on the importance and significance that employee puts on group identity, according to the theory. As a result, humans form a sense of social identity regarding the social characteristics of the groups to which they belong, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and political party (Chan, 2016).

The concept of social identity is crucial because it aids in understanding how inhabitants' culture and social identities impact their experiences and attitudes (Sharpley, 2014). The SIT emphasizes that a person's sense of belonging to a particular group motivates them to participate in a marketing context. This is relevant to this research, which shows the impact of organizational culture on EBBE in a hospitality solution provider. It is a concept that may be utilized to describe the themes that motivated employees must be committed to a certain brand. As a result, knowing this idea might be beneficial to hospitality sector professionals (González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Kaur et al., 2020; Kumar and Kumar, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, comprehending the SIT's arguments improves one's capacity to assess the mediating impact of organizational culture in affecting EBBE. Based on the significant roles of SET and SIT in shaping EBBE, the following research evaluated the association of brand knowledge and EBBE along with the mediating role of organizational culture.

Association of Brand Knowledge With EBBE

With the advent of an outside to the inside business standpoint, service businesses have begun to regard customer support representatives as their internal clients. As a result, employee perceptions of brand equity, a form of consistent branding activities, have begun to gain traction (Yang et al., 2015). The notion is described as "the distinctive influence that brand awareness has on an employee's reaction to internal brand management," according to King, who saw the need for a third strategy (Keller, 1993). King and Grace claimed that staff brand equity is driven by brand knowledge, predicated on the notion of CBBE. Such that, King and Grace's method is founded on the notion that great brand equity is really the outcome of brand knowledge impacts, such as job characteristics and brand recognition (King et al., 2012). Thus, according to the study by Keller (2003), brand knowledge includes "all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information, as well as the personal meaning about a brand retained in consumer memory."

Even though the term refers to customers, the notion is also applicable to workers because brand awareness is the cornerstone for building brand equity. Similarly, employees who are familiar with the brand are more likely to grasp their responsibilities and execute on the brand promise (Mangold and Miles, 2007; Erkmen, 2018). As a result, brand expertise combined with precise comprehension aids employees in overcoming ambiguity and committing to the brand (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001; Kumar and Kaushik, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2020). In terms of confusion, supplying workers with enough information regarding brand expectations will improve overall role clarity or reduce their role ambiguity. More precisely, contextual performance is a method for companies to evaluate the impact of brand awareness. Employees who are well-informed on the brand's values and expectations are more likely to absorb them and pass them on to clients (Business et al., 2018; Clark et al., 2020).

Furthermore, employees who seem to be knowledgeable and confident in their positions are more likely to form a bond with the firm and its brand. Considering the significance of attachment development, a few academics coined the term "employee brand commitment," which they described as "the level of workers' psychological attachment to the brand, which determines their readiness to go above and beyond to achieve the brand's goals." Scholars defined brand commitment as "the degree to which workers identify and are associated with their brand experience, are willing to expend extra efforts to achieve the brand's objectives, and are inclined to stick with the service organization" in accordance with this description (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009; Reis et al., 2021). Based on these definitions, dedication is definitely the most critical consideration in determining equity. As previously mentioned, providing brand

awareness allows employees to have a clear understanding of brand standards. Employees would acquire a sense of loyalty to the brand if the knowledge communicated about the branding is appreciated (Erkmen, 2018). The following hypothesis was suggested in regard to examining the relationship between brand knowledge and EBBE in the hospitality sector.

H_1. *Brand knowledge has a positive association with employee-based brand equity.*

Association of Brand Loyalty With EBBE

For academics and researchers alike, organizational loyalty remains a fascinating issue. Whether from the standpoint of an employee or a consumer, loyalty is a vital measure of a successful partnership (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016; Lim, 2016). Employee retention is a long-term goal for corporate management, whereas customer retention is a long-term goal for employees who provide high-quality hospitality. Loveman (1998) argued that when management uses internal branding methods to recruit new workers or internal branding tactics to keep good employees, loyalty is created and assessed by employee pledges and service duration. Employees are motivated to become a member of a specific brand *via* group conversations, training, seminars, and other tactics that assist them to operate according to brand promises (Loveman, 1998; Book et al., 2019). Employee loyalty *via* equity, according to Echchakoui, arises when an employee demonstrates loyalty to a firm, which improves the outcome of all attempts, such as training, role clarification, and briefing, that an organization has used on its personnel (Echchakoui, 2015).

Few researchers described that loyalty is the most essential element of the ideal company culture and that a loyal employee stays a valuable workforce (Echchakoui, 2015). Employee loyalty toward brands is increased when firms focus on connecting human resources with the company and is to deliver *via* internal branding (Du Preez et al., 2017). Emotions are linked to humans, according to the notion of emotional contagion, and hence, staff loyalty is conveyed to consumers as well. Similarly, Bitner (1990) demonstrated that branding and marketing efforts affected customer purchasing decisions and long-term connections with businesses, which stemmed from staff loyalty and dedication to their jobs. Tschirhart et al. (2005) maintained that devoted personnel perform more effectively and that this devotion not only delivers a greater return on investment for a firm but also leaves clients with a positive and emotional impression (Stock et al., 2016). Based on the significance of organizational loyalty toward strengthening the brand, the author proposed the following hypothesis.

H_2. *Organizational loyalty has a positive association with employee-based brand equity.*

Mediating Role of Organizational Culture

Culture is an all-pervading phenomenon in human experience that has proven difficult to describe and quantify. Culture can be described as a determinant as well as a result of social identity. This identity also serves as a connection between someone's self-portrait and the architecture and intellectual dynamics of the social groupings. It is thought that an individual will develop a social identity through referencing to, adhering to, and emphasizing aspects of resemblance with other people. Basic premises or preconceptions, conventions, and beliefs among groups, which Hofstede defines as culture, are examples of these points of similarity (Hofstede, 1980; Fellows and Liu, 2013; Smaldino, 2019). Researchers acknowledge the importance of identity, arguing that people's judgments and actions are generally impacted by and consistent with social identities.

The organizational culture component, which evolved from Hofstede's study in the 1970's and 1980's, is based on the conception of culture (Hofstede, 1980). It has now become a contentious and significant topic in managerial study and practice. Organizational culture represents the shared values, conventions, and assumptions inside a company, according to the concept of culture (Fellows and Liu, 2013; Smaldino, 2019). Seemingly, organizational culture is ingrained in cultural identity and particular subcultures. International organizations, for example, might be embedded in far more than just national culture. These beliefs, opinions, and actions of organizational personnel assist them to comprehend how the organization works are referred to as organizational culture (Theurer et al., 2018). Each business has its own "environment," which implies that knowing the organizational culture is critical for any company looking to achieve a competitive advantage through product innovativeness (Xie et al., 2019).

As a result, organizations with good cultural support are better positioned to achieve positive results in terms of employee behavior, perspective, ethical conduct, morality, and job satisfaction, positioning them for increased long-term corporate competitiveness and success (Wahyuningsih et al., 2019). Organizational culture, as per researchers, has two emphases, one outside as well as the other internal. The outward focus is represented by the flexibility and mission aspects, while the internal focus is represented by the involvement and consistency dimensions. Adaptability and engagement together characterize the organization's degree of flexibility, while the mission and consistency aspects combined show an emphasis on stability (Denison et al., 2012). A few researchers (Alsheikh et al., 2018; Saleem and Ilkhanizadeh, 2021) have identified the mediating role of organizational culture in different perspectives, but no one has evaluated the mediating role of organizational culture between brand knowledge, organizational loyalty, and EBBE; therefore, the author devised the following hypotheses for evaluating the aiding role of organizational culture.

H_3. *Organizational culture mediates the relationship between brand knowledge and employee-based brand equity.*

H_4. *Organizational culture mediates the relationship between organizational loyalty and employee-based brand equity.*

A following conceptual model (**Figure 1**) has been formed based on the abovementioned literature and hypothesis.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedure

Participants of this study were contacted based on personal contacts, and in this regard, employees of the hospitality sector were approached. Data were collected in two waves to reduce

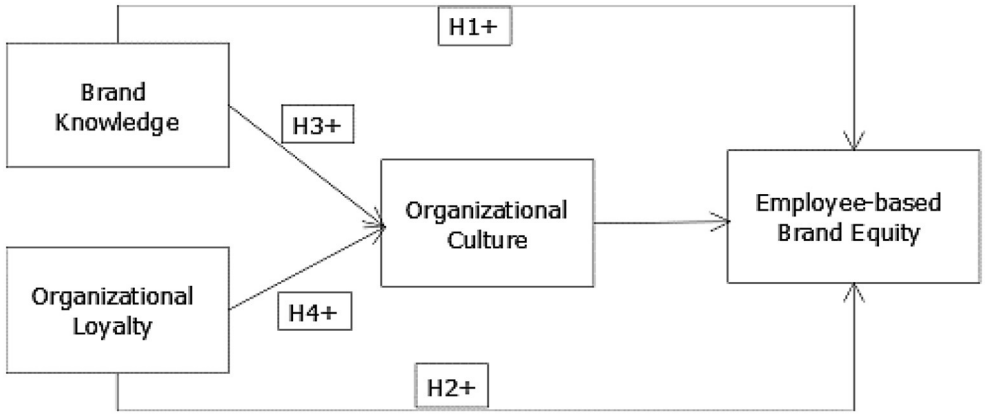

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

the issue of common method bias. Initially, formal approval was obtained from the concerned restaurant manager, and later on, employees were contacted, they were first briefed about the nature and purpose of the study, and their informed consent in this regard was obtained. In the first wave, data related to the independent variables of this study (brand knowledge and organizational loyalty) were obtained from the respondents. Initially, 600 questionnaires were distributed in the first wave, out of which 400 were received back. A secret identification code was allotted to each questionnaire so that the respondents could be traced easily later on. In the second wave, the remaining respondents were approached who had filled the survey in the first wave. At this time from the distributed 400 questionnaires, only 320 were received back, from which the partial and incomplete questionnaires were discarded, and at the end, 306 questionnaires were left.

These final and completed responses were used for the data analysis and inferential purpose in this study. This sample size represents the required response rate sufficiently because, according to the general rule of thumb, there are required 5–10 responses for each study variable. In this study, there are totally four constructs, and thus, a sample size of 50 would have been sufficient. Similarly, the author has employed the partial least square (PLS) approach through Smart PLS, which can handle the small sample size very comfortably. Additionally, the other criteria were also met in this regard for selecting a suitable sample size (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970). Respondents in this study were frontline workers, and it was perceived that they might be busy in their jobs due to exposure with the customers at the front line. Thus, it was the chance that and might possibly they try to fill the questionnaire through monotonic responses. Thus, the issue of common method bias possibly would have shattered the results, so this study used reverse-coded questions to minimize the monotonic responses in the data (Malhotra et al., 2006; Ng and Feldman, 2013).

Demographic Details

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were also obtained. Initially, the gender of the respondent was asked from the respondents. In addition to this, age and experience in years were also enquired from the respondents. From the perspective of gender, 77% of respondents were male while 23% of respondents were female. The experience was enquired in two dimensions: (1) their total experience and (2) experience in the current firm. It was operationalized that data will be collected only from those respondents who have experience of more than 3 years in the current organization so that they could provide better information regarding organizational loyalty and EBBE.

Measures

Data in this study were obtained from the respondents on a 5-point Likert scale, and already established and tested scales have been adopted in this study to operationalize the study constructs. In this regard, the first exogenous construct of this study, i.e., brand knowledge, was measured based on the 4-item scale (Aurand et al., 2005). Previously, other scales measuring brand associations have been used in the literature, and the author has taken only dimensions related to brand knowledge and covering internal branding (Esch et al., 2006). Similarly, the second exogenous construct of this study, i.e., organizational loyalty, has been measured based on the scale developed by Van Dyne et al. (1994) and recently used by Jauhari and Singh (2013). This scale has six items that cover the concept of organizational loyalty (see **Appendix**).

The mediating variable of this study (organizational culture) has been measured based on two dimensions, namely, trust and respect for the individuals. Originally, this scale was developed by Ghosh and Srivastava (2014) and it covers seven dimensions of organizational culture, while the author has conceptualized only those two dimensions that were best fitted in the context of this study. Sample items include "Most people in my organization can be relied upon to keep their promises," and "I believe that my colleagues are well-intentioned individuals." Finally, the outcome variable of this study, i.e., EBBE, is measured based on the 5-item scale developed by Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010). A sample item for this scale includes "I am aware that everything I say or do can affect the brand image".

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Keeping in view the complexity of the conceptual framework, the author has employed a multivariate data analysis tool based on the PLS approach. The most common and frequently used tool in this regard is Smart PLS, and the author has used this statistical software (Smart PLS 3.9) to assess the model (Sarstedt et al., 2014). One more reason in this regard was based on the data normality issue, as Smart PLS deals very well with the non-normal data, and the issue of normality does not influence the predictive capability of the model (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, one other reason was based on the theoretical contribution of the study, because theory in case of EBBE is less developed, and thus, using the PLS approach provides benefits in this regard. PLS approach assesses the model in two dimensions: (1) assessment of the measurement model and (2) assessment of the structural model. The measurement model is assessed to confirm the quality criteria, based on reliability and validity (Hair et al., 2017).

To assess the measurement model, the statistics related to reliability and validity were checked, and it was found that all the indicators pertaining to the reliability and validity measures were intact (**Table 1**). Reliability statistics in terms of alpha range from 0.764 to 0.836. A higher level of reliability was observed for construct organizational loyalty while a lower level was observed in case of the brand-based equity. Similarly, the second measure of reliability analysis was also depicting a reasonable level of reliability (ranging from 0.774 to 0.843). The third measure of reliability statistics, i.e., composite reliability, was also depicting a good and reasonable level of 0.845–0.884. Thus, all the measures of reliability have indicated a satisfactory and sound level of reliability, while in case of validity, the first measure of validity was checked based on average variance extracted (AVE). In this regard, the AVE of all the study constructs was within the acceptable range ($\geq$0.50). Thus, a reasonable and sufficient level of convergent validity was explained (**Table 1**), and more than 50% of the variance in the study constructs was shared. The second measure of convergent validity relates to the outer loadings. For the assessment of convergent validity based on outer loadings, items with poor loadings were traced and were dropped from further analysis. One item from the construct brand knowledge was dropped (BI-1) due to weak and poor outer loadings (loadings <0.708) (Mela and Kopalle, 2002). Similarly, the second construct of this study organizational loyalty was checked for poor outer loadings, and item OL-3 was dropped due to less and poor loadings. One item from the study constructs EBBE was dropped (BBE-2) from the analysis due to poor loadings. No item was dropped from the study construct organizational culture (covered through dimensions, trust, and respect for the individuals; **Table 2** and **Figure 2**).

The second measure of validity is related to discriminant validity, and for this purpose, it has been assessed through two criteria, namely, Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios (Hair et al., 2017) as depicted from **Tables 3**, **4**. Both criteria were met comfortably as the square root of the AVE of all variables was higher than the correlations in the respective row and column (Hair et al., 2011).

TABLE 1 | Reliability and validity.

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand-based equity	0.764	0.774	0.845	0.577
Brand knowledge	0.787	0.830	0.874	0.698
Organizational culture	0.804	0.820	0.856	0.499
Organizational loyalty	0.836	0.843	0.884	0.604

TABLE 2 | Outer loadings and variance inflation factor (VIF).

Item	Brand-based equity	Brand knowledge	Organizational culture	Organizational loyalty	VIF
BBE	0.708				2.393
BBE1	0.739				1.284
BBE4	0.794				1.480
BBE5	0.793				2.751
BI2		0.768			1.509
BI3		0.852			1.858
BI4		0.883			1.710
OL1				0.850	4.871
OL2				0.766	1.779
OL4				0.679	1.395
OL5				0.798	1.830
OL6				0.784	4.215
RI1			0.786		1.900
RI2			0.739		1.831
RI3			0.619		1.465
T1			0.704		3.019
T2			0.702		4.018
T3			0.678		2.838

While assessing the discriminant validity through HTMT, both liberal and conservative recommendations were followed. From the perspective of liberal criteria, the value of HTMT ratios in **Table 4** must be <0.90 while conservative criteria insist that it should be <0.85. Hence, both liberal and conservative criteria have been met (**Table 4** to assess discriminant validity through HTMT ratio).

Moreover, model fitness was assessed based on the coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect size (F^2). Model fitness has been found on the bases of these criteria. First, the value of R^2, in this case, is 0.568, indicating that both predictors (brand knowledge and organizational loyalty) along with mediating variable (organizational culture) are explaining 57% variation in the outcome variable (EBBE). Similarly, both predictors (brand knowledge and organizational loyalty) were explaining a 17% variation in mediating variable (organizational culture; **Table 5** and **Figure 2**; Hair et al., 2017). While noting effect size, the value of F^2 has been observed good and depicts the good-quality criteria. Moreover, this study has also tested the model's

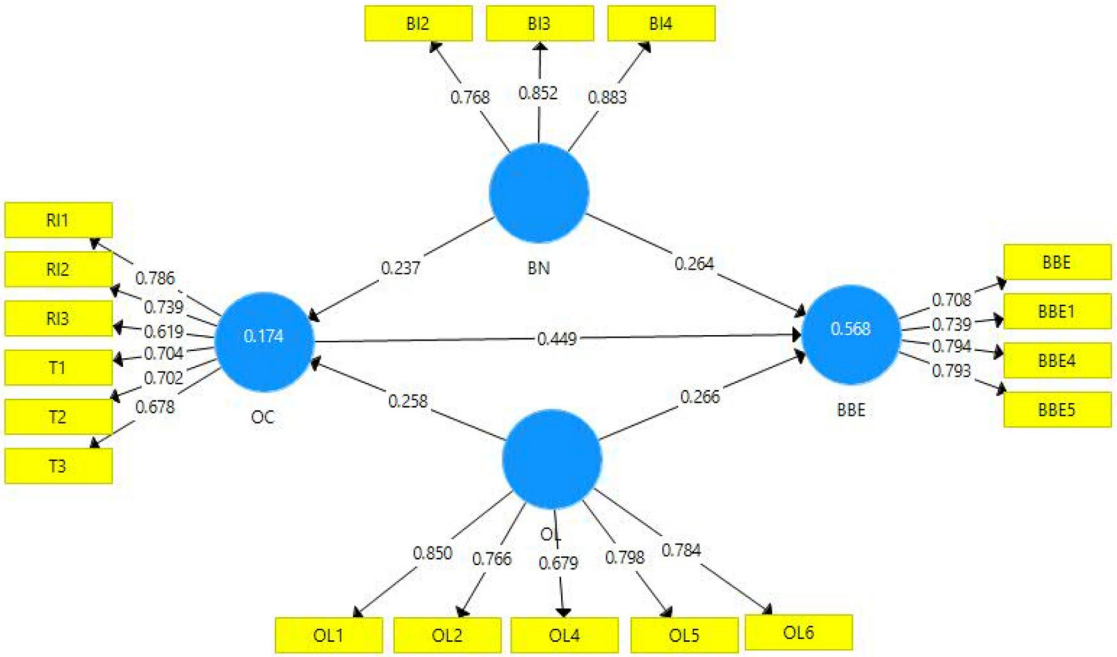

FIGURE 2 | Path diagram.

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larker criteria).

Construct	Brand-based equity	Brand knowledge	Organizational culture	Organizational loyalty
Brand-based equity	*0.759*			
Brand knowledge	0.529	*0.836*		
Organizational culture	0.635	0.344	*0.707*	
Organizational loyalty	0.536	0.415	0.357	*0.777*

Square root of AVE of the respective construct is reported in diagonal values.

TABLE 4 | Discriminant validity [heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio].

Construct	Brand-based equity	Brand knowledge	Organizational culture	Organizational loyalty
Brand-based equity	-			
Brand knowledge	0.636	-		
Organizational culture	0.722	0.405	-	
Organizational loyalty	0.644	0.495	0.416	-

predictive relevance as recommended by Geisser (1975). The value of Q^2 was assessed, and it has been found greater than zero, depicting a good level of predictive relevance.

In case of hypotheses testing, it has been performed based on the *t*- and *p*-statistics for each path (**Table 7**). This study anticipated a total of four hypotheses, out of which two were formulated to assess the direct impact while the remaining two were related to the mediation analysis based on mediating variable (organizational culture). The first hypothesis of this study which is related to the relationship between brand knowledge and EBBE has been found statistically significant. In this regard, the value of beta (coefficient) indicated that one unit change in brand knowledge will bring 0.267 unit change in the EBBE (values of *t* and *p*, in this case, were satisfactory, **Table 7**). This state of affairs indicates that brand knowledge has the potency to influence the EBBE positively. Similarly, the second hypothesis of this study is based on the relationship between organizational loyalty and EBBE. This path has been found significant as depicted by *p*- and *t*-statistics in this path (**Tables 6**, **7** and **Figure 3**). Thus, it has been found that organizational loyalty influences EBBE positively. Moreover, the coefficient for this path depicts that one unit change in organizational loyalty will bring 0.260 unit change in EBBE. An interesting outcome of this study indicates that both the predictors are sharing almost the same effect in predicting the EBBE. The premise of SET given by Blau (1964) supports these statistically tested hypotheses. Similarly, indirect effects related to mediation were tested based on the variance account for (VAF) approach. For this purpose, the indirect effect was divided through total effect, and the obtained value was multiplied by 100

TABLE 5 | F^2 and adjusted-R^2.

Construct	*F*-square	
	Brand-based equity	**Organizational culture**
Brand knowledge	0.127	0.056
Organizational culture	**0.385**	-
Organizational loyalty	0.127	0.067
Construct	***R*-square**	
	***R* square**	***R* square adjusted**
Brand-based equity	0.568	0.563
Organizational culture	0.174	0.168

Bold values shows significance between the variables.

TABLE 6 | Path estimation.

Path	Coefficient	*t*	*p*
Direct paths			
Brand knowledge → Brand-based equity	0.267	4.590	0.000
Brand knowledge → Organizational culture	0.237	4.306	0.000
Organizational culture → Brand-based equity	0.452	12.176	0.000
Organizational loyalty → Brand-based equity	0.266	6.072	0.000
Organizational loyalty → Organizational culture	0.260	3.897	0.000
Indirect path			
Brand knowledge → Organizational culture → Brand-based equity	0.107	4.215	0.000
Organizational loyalty → Organizational culture → Brand-based equity	0.117	3.746	0.000
Total path			
Brand knowledge → Brand-based equity	0.374	6.048	0.000
Organizational loyalty → Brand-based equity	0.384	7.680	0.000

TABLE 7 | Hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses		Beta	*t*	*P*	Status
H1	Brand knowledge → Brand-based equity	0.267	4.590	0.000	Supported
H2	Organizational loyalty → Brand-based equity	0.266	6.072	0.000	Supported
Mediation analysis		**Indirect effect**	**Total effect**	**VAF**	**Status**
H3	Brand knowledge → Organizational culture → Brand-based equity	0.107	0.374	29%	Supported
H4	Organizational loyalty → Organizational culture → Brand-based equity	0.117	0.384	30%	Supported

to calculate the percentage. In case of H3 where it was supposed that organizational culture mediates the relationship between brand knowledge and EBBE, the statistical results indicate that organizational culture is partially mediating this path, which provides sufficient evidence to accept H3. Similarly, H4 was also tested through the VAF approach, and it has been proved that organizational culture mediates the relationship between organizational loyalty and EBBE. These findings are supported through the premise of SET proposed by Blau (1964). These findings are supported through the previous studies (Sekiguchi, 2007; Erkmen, 2018), and it can be safely drawn that employee brand based in firms can be developed through the promotion of knowledge and loyalty within organizational circuits.

DISCUSSION

A lot of research in the past has focused on different aspects of consumer-based brand equity, but very less attention has been given to real antecedents of EBBE. Consumer-based brand equity is becoming more of a concern, but the role of workers is also becoming more prominent (Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2010). Employees' capacity to execute client expectations is the foundation for building a strong brand and delivering perceived service excellence (King et al., 2013). As the focus of attention changes more and more to employees, experts argue that studying brand equity from the standpoint of employees, dubbed EBBE, is vital (Gounaris, 2006; Mo et al., 2021). Enhancing EBBE helps organizations recruit competent individuals, and workers' skills and experience provide them with a competitive edge. Professionals' identification with enterprises, in contrast, may add to client satisfaction since they connect directly with consumers or customers (Poulis and Wisker, 2016). This research has focused on evaluating the impact of antecedents of equity on EBBE in the hospitality sector.

Brands are made up of a combination of practical and emotional characteristics. To produce a successful commitment to brand image, a brand combines practical and emotional values. As a result, the success of a brand is defined by how effectively it keeps its promises. Providing core competencies in the hotel industry, in contrast, is more challenging. For starters, due to their intangible nature, hospitality services are frequent performances or experiences that are difficult to measure. As a result, articulating the benefits of a brand to customers is more difficult (Erkmen, 2018; Dinçer et al., 2020). Additionally, since consumption and production are intricately intertwined, service providers are commonly misidentified as the service they supply (Erkmen, 2018). Finally, uniformity in hospitality services is difficult to attain because service delivery is dependent on personnel performance. This research evaluated the impact of brand knowledge which is an antecedent of brand equity on EBBE and found a significant relationship between both. This strengthened the previous understanding of brand knowledge in consumer-based brand equity.

It proved that if more attention is given to the brand knowledge of employees through training, then it could result in better developing EBBE. Even though the term "brand knowledge" refers to customers, the idea is also applicable to employees of hospitality services because brand awareness is

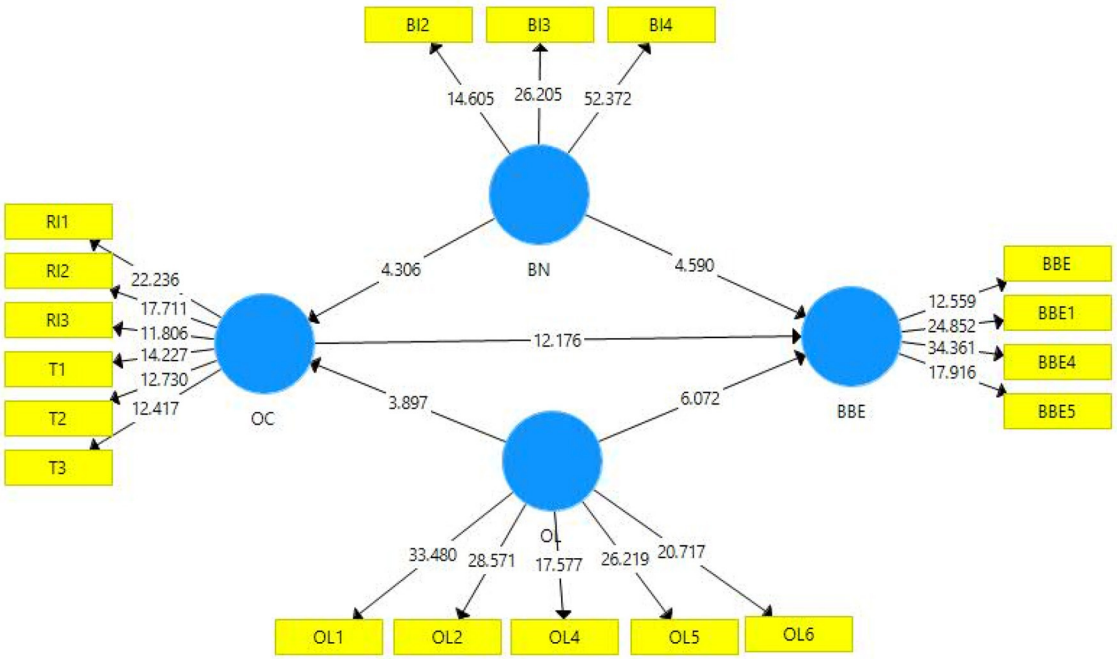

FIGURE 3 | Path significance.

the cornerstone for building brand equity. Similarly, employees who are familiar with the brand are more likely to grasp their responsibilities and execute the brand promise (Mangold and Miles, 2007; Erkmen, 2018). As a result, brand expertise combined with precise comprehension aids employees in overcoming ambiguity and committing to the brand (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001; Kumar and Kaushik, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2020). Another aspect of EBBE was also studied in this research to assess whether organizational loyalty leads to EBBE or not. The results were significant in identifying that there was a strong positive direct relationship between organizational loyalty and EBBE.

This kind of relationship was not previously studied; hence, it could give some novel insights about hospitality services across the globe for shaping effective EBBE. Few researchers described that loyalty is the most essential element of the ideal company culture and that a loyal employee stays a valuable workforce (Echchakoui, 2015). When companies focus on linking human resources with the company through internal branding, employee loyalty to the brand increases (Du Preez et al., 2017). Therefore, the outcomes of this research are valuable for the marketing practices of internal management in organizations. The last hypotheses were about the evaluation of the mediating role of organizational culture between brand knowledge, organizational loyalty, and EBBE. As supposed, the mediating link of organizational culture also proved to be significant between these antecedents and EBBE.

It suggested that if there is a direct relationship among antecedents with EBBE, then that relationship could be more strengthened by providing an organizational culture to the employees for developing brand equity among them. Every firm has its unique "environment," which means that understanding organizational culture is crucial for any company seeking a competitive edge through product innovation (Xie et al., 2019). As a result, companies with strong cultural support are better equipped to produce significant advantages in terms of work performance, perspective, moral behavior, ethics, and work happiness, putting themselves in a better position for the long-term business success and competitiveness (Wahyuningsih et al., 2019). A few researchers (Alsheikh et al., 2018; Saleem and Ilkhanizadeh, 2021) have identified the mediating role of organizational culture in different perspectives, but no one has evaluated the mediating role of organizational culture between brand knowledge, organizational loyalty, and EBBE before, so this research would be a novel addition in the field.

Theoretical and Practical Contribution

This study tends to contribute to the theoretical side of literature from many perspectives: First, this study has tested the EBBE from the perspective of frontline employees of the hospitality sector which is a unique contribution. Second, this study anticipated a mediating mechanism in the shape of organizational culture between the relationship between organizational loyalty and brand knowledge while predicting EBBE. This is another contribution of this study. Similarly, the author tested organizational culture from the perspective of trust and respect for individuals, which is also the contribution of the study. From the practical point of view, this study contends that organizations should try to promote positive knowledge about the firms/organizations to promote a culture of trust and respect for others if they want to promote EBBE.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some potential limitations, such as related to the data collection and the operationalization of study variables. First, this study has only anticipated two dimensions of organizational culture, namely, trust and respect for individuals. Adding other dimensions of organizational culture can provide in-depth insights regarding EBBE. Second, the author has collected data from the hospitality sector, where the frontline employees usually are over-occupied, and thus, collecting data from other sectors can provide more detailed information. Some other study constructs can also be added to the model, such as justice, and its different types, such as procedural, distribute, and interactional justice (De Cuyper et al., 2009; Guest and Clinton, 2017). Other mediating mechanisms can also be tested, such as job satisfaction. Similarly, the moderating variables can also be tested in future studies, such as national culture (power distance and collectivism). Similarly, EBBE can be tested in dimensions in future studies, such as brand allegiance and brand endorsement (Millward and Brewerton, 2000).

CONCLUSION

The empirical findings of this study indicate that brand-based equity is influenced by brand knowledge and organizational loyalty. Both organizational loyalty and brand image have almost equal impacts on EBBE. Thus, it can be safely concluded that EBBE is positively influenced at the workplace when employees have a sense of loyalty and knowledge related to the procedures and policies of the firm. Additionally, the impact of organizational culture on EBBE is also positive. Thus, positive organizational culture at the workplace promotes EBBE (Shore et al., 2001, 2006). Furthermore, brand knowledge can also promote a positive culture at the workplace through promoting trust and respect for individuals at the workplace. The same pattern of results indicates that organizational loyalty can also promote a positive culture at the workplace within the organization which further promotes EBBE.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Shandong Academy of Art, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

XL conceived, designed the concept, collected the data, wrote the manuscript, and read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A - Scale and sources

Scale	Items	Source
Organizational loyalty	6	➢ Avoids extra duties at workplace (Negative question) ➢ Does not work beyond what is required (Negative question) ➢ Volunteers for overwork when needed ➢ Is guided by high professional standards ➢ Maintains confidentiality of information ➢ Reports wrongdoing by others
Trust (organizational culture)	3	➢ Most people in my organization can be relied upon to keep their promises ➢ I believe that my colleagues are well-intentioned individuals ➢ I believe that my boss will treat me fairly while appraising my performance
Respect for the individual (organizational culture)	3	➢ My boss trusts me to deliver on his/her expectations ➢ My supervisor believes that good ideas and solutions to problems can come from any member of the group ➢ My organization makes the best possible use of my intellectual capacity
EBBE	5	➢ I am aware that our brand significantly contributes to the overall success of our company. ➢ I am convinced that our brand allows us to achieve a higher price for our products. ➢ I believe that our customers buy higher quantities due to our brand. ➢ I believe that our brand accounts considerably for the loyalty of our customers. ➢ I am convinced that our customers recommend our brand to others
Brand knowledge (internal branding)	4	➢ The (brand) values are reinforced through internal communications ➢ Training is provided to help employees use these values ➢ The skill set necessary to deliver these values is considered in staffing decisions ➢ Annual performance reviews include metrics on delivering the values

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Impact of Knowledge Dissemination on Employee-Based Brand Equity: Mediating Role of Brand Identification and Emotional Attachment

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The challenging competitive situation in the market forces the organizations to recognize the crucial role of branding. Many studies focused on financial and customer perspectives and ignored the importance of employee-based brand building in the organization. Employee-based brand equity plays a vital role in increasing organizational performance. Hence, this study puts effort into brand-building and recognized many factors that develop employee-based brand equity for organizations. This study examines the role of internal knowledge dissemination and employees-based brand equity through brand identification and emotional attachment. This study also assesses the direct relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and brand identification, internal knowledge dissemination and emotional attachment, brand identification and employee-based brand equity, and emotional attachment and employee-based brand equity. For this purpose, this study adopts a convenient sampling technique and questionnaire survey method and gathered data with 712 sample sizes from employees of various clothing brands in China. For empirical examination of the data, this study considers the partial least square structural equation modeling technique and analyzed data using the Smart PLS 3.3.3 software. The outcomes revealed that internal knowledge dissemination negatively influences employee-based brand equity. This study finds a positive direct association between internal knowledge dissemination and brand identification, internal knowledge dissemination and emotional attachment, brand identification and employee-based brand equity, and emotional attachment and employee-based brand equity. Moreover, this study finds that emotional attachment and brand identification positively mediate the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and employee-based brand equity. The findings of this study provide an insight to the organizations that effective dissemination of the internal knowledge enhances employees' brand identification and their emotional attachments. Consequently, these positive attributes of employees play a constructive role in creating employee-based brand equity. This study also has some valuable theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: internal knowledge dissemination, brand identification, emotional attachment, employee-based brand equity, organization

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INTRODUCTION

In this ever-changing era, it is very challenging for the organization to deal with the market dynamics to create a solid competitive position (Iglesias et al., 2019). Firms are trying to find tools and techniques to create a competitive edge. However, Hasni et al. (2018) pointed out that organizations are now focusing on branding and using it as a powerful tool for maintaining sustainability. In the preceding decades, organizations mainly emphasize branding from the consumers' perspective, but currently, this trend is fading (Iglesias et al., 2019). In parallel with consumers' perspective of branding, organizations are now giving attention to employee perspective as well. King and Grace (2010) also acknowledged the importance of branding with employees' perspectives and said that the intellectual abilities of employees are the valuable asset of organization for effective branding.

The organizational efforts invested in the form of branding could pave the way for the creation of organizational brand equity (Fernández-Ruano et al., 2022). Furthermore, they stated that effective organizational brand equity is a constructive indicator for the long-term sustainability of a firm. According to the Feldwick's (1996) point of view, brand equity could be termed as the value addition effort of the firm to generate a long-term relationship with stakeholders. Brand equity has a crucial role in achieving organizational goals and objectives in the form of increasing firm performance. Higher brand equity enables organizations to win greater trust and commitment of customers (Hanaysha and Al-Shaikh, 2021). King and Grace (2009) pointed out three essential dimensions of brand equity, namely, financial-based, consumer-based, and employee-based brand equity (EBBE). Furthermore, they revealed that the literature has pieces of evidence of brand equity creation from the perspective of financial and consumers, but there is a dearth of literature on the employee perspective.

Iglesias et al. (2019) further shed light on EBBE and said that organizations should focus on employees' training and development to understand brand values because they can play a crucial role in making or breaking the brand. Moreover, Hanaysha and Al-Shaikh (2021) also pointed out the importance of EBBE and said that organizational performance is greatly influenced by employee contribution in the creation of the brand equity process. In addition, it is more convenient for the firm to achieve expected organizational success when there is a positive alignment between employees' values and the brand. Scholars documented the importance in the literature of brand equity and said that firms can improve the ability of delivering promises accurately by considering EBBE as an important aspect of organizational strategy (Piehler et al., 2016; Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020; Hanaysha and Al-Shaikh, 2021). However, Vallaster and Lindgreen (2011) acknowledged that when organizations consider employees as part of brand-building strategies, they admit the importance of employees in the firm's success. This positive signal of the organization can create a sense of emotional attachment and psychological commitment of employees to the brand.

Patwardhan and Balasubramanian (2011) noticed that employees' emotional attachment seeks huge attention from researchers due to its important role in the brand equity process. EBBE is positively influenced by the psychological and emotional attachment of employees. These positive attributions of employees assist the organization in gaining expected outcomes (Poulis and Wisker, 2016). The employees with emotional attachment feel like an important part of organizations, and they serve their energies more efficiently in the building process of brand equity. This type of emotional bond between employees plays a favorable role in the firm's overall performance. King and Grace (2010) shed further light and said that organizational sustainability also has a strong link with employees' emotional attachment. However, Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) revealed that although emotional engagement is important for the creation of EBBE, there is a need to consider another important aspect of the EBBE creation process, such as brand identification.

Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) noticed that the literature argues the brand identification from the customer-brand perspective and ignores this concept from other internal stakeholders' points of view. In addition, brand identification consequently affects the attitude and behavior of employees. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) shed further light and said that organizational citizenship behavior could be a possible antecedent of employee brand identification. When employees feel the similarity between the brand value and their values, they feel a sense of belongingness with the brand (Lashley, 1999). Helm et al. (2016) argued in favor of employee brand identification and said that the brand equity creation process is interlinked with the brand identification of employees. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) further argued that brand identification and internal knowledge dissemination are important aspects of the EBBE building process.

Erkmen (2018) pointed out that the internal dissemination of knowledge is the basis of the EBBE creation process. Organizational effective strategies for internal knowledge dissemination are an important tool to improve the overall organizational performance. Knowledge dissemination is a process of transferring the brand's values to employees to deliver the organizational promise to consumers accurately (King and Grace, 2010). In addition, internal organizational efforts in knowledge dissemination favorably influenced the employee level of commitment and satisfaction. Billy and To (2013) stated that internal knowledge dissemination affects the work attitude of an employee and their long-term retention with the organization.

This study attempts to contribute to the literature in eight ways. First, this study serves the literature by adding insight into the building process of EBBE. This study tries to point out the importance of brand equity for organizations from employees' perspectives as scholars acknowledged that there is a dearth of literature on EBBE (King and Grace, 2010; King and So, 2015; Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020). Second, based on social exchange theory, this study tries to find out how internal knowledge dissemination plays a role in the EBBE creation process. However, Erkmen (2018) documented in the literature that organizations' internal knowledge dissemination efforts have

a positive association with EBBE. Third, based on identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), this study attempts to determine the role of internal knowledge dissemination in employee brand identification activities. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) pointed out that internal knowledge dissemination acts as a precursor to employee brand identification. Fourth, on the basis of signaling theory, this study tries to reveal the role of internal knowledge dissemination in the emotional attachment of employees. Fifth, this study tries to know how brand identification participates in EBBE, as Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) argued the importance of brand identification in the brand equity building process from an employee's perspective. Sixth, this study also attempts to find out the positive direct relationship of emotional attachment with EBBE. Seventh, this study tries to determine the mediating role of brand identification between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. This study also attempts to find out the mediating role of emotional attachment between knowledge dissemination and EBBE.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: first, this study introduces the key concept of the theoretical framework and reviews the literature for hypothesis development. Next, the methodology of the article is documented, and the findings are discussed. Next, this article presents the discussion part. Finally, this study finishes with concluding remarks as well as future research directions and limitations of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee-Based Brand Equity

In this era of competition, organizations have to deal with a complex business marketplace (Poulis and Wisker, 2016). Moreover, organizations have to manage their tangible and intangible equities to compete with the dynamics of the market. However, according to the King and Grace's (2010) point of view, intangible equities have more weight for competitive advantage than tangible equities. Additionally, Hasni et al. (2018) pointed out that to compete in a complex marketplace, organizations use branding as a powerful tool to maintain their sustainability. These brand-building activities of firms help them out in achieving the goals of brand equity creation (Fernández-Ruano et al., 2022).

Prados-Peña and Del Barrio-García (2021) shed light on the significance of brand equity and said that it is an important and valuable intangible asset of organizations. King and Grace (2006) pointed out that financial, customer, and employee-based brand equities are three fundamental approaches to measuring brand equity. Furthermore, they give arguments that literature gives more attention to financial and customer perceptive of brand equity and ignores the importance of EBBE. Lee et al. (2019) termed EBBE as the employee's constructive and productive brand behaviors that are interlinked with brand identity and brand knowledge. Wilden et al. (2006) acknowledged that firms are now realizing the importance of the knowledge and skills of employees in organizational success and their constructive role in brand-building activities. Moreover, Lee et al. (2019) also commented that employees are the firm's important stakeholders and are also termed as the organization's internal customers in the literature. Furthermore, they acknowledged that positive internal dissemination of knowledge and organizational brand-building strategies shape the attitude and behaviors of the employee for the creation of brand equity. However, scholars noticed that the frontline employees (leaders) have more considerable role in shaping attitude and behaviors of other employees, as well as other external stakeholders in the brand-building process (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011).

Poulis and Wisker (2016) stated that "brand endorsement, brand-consistent behaviors, and brand allegiance" are three important dimensions of EBBE. Furthermore, they elaborated on the term brand endorsement and said that employees are willing and enthusiastic to say positive things about the brand. The brand's positive image in employees' minds is a favorable indication for organizations to have a long-term relationship with employees. The second important dimension is brand-consistent behaviors, which could be termed as the extent of employee perception about the uniformity of values of employees and organizations (King and So, 2015). When employees feel identification with the values of organizations, they will ultimately put their efforts into fulfilling the expectations of customers. Poulis and Wisker (2016) defined the third dimension of EBBE and stated that brand allegiance is employees' intention to remain the part of the firm for a long time. Employee-organization long-term relationships are a positive signal for the firm in the EBBE building process.

Internal Knowledge Dissemination

King and Grace (2010) pointed out that organizations need an effective system to provide clear direction to shape employees' attitude and behavior for the brand equity process. Furthermore, they instructed that it is the organizational responsibility to generate required information and transfer to employees in a respectful and relevant manner. The effective internal communication system of the organization plays a central role in improving employees' brand-building efforts (Men, 2014). Moreover, Robson and Tourish (2005) stated that organizations have to put their efforts into internal knowledge dissemination for more effective results from employees in the brand-building process. King and Grace (2010) defined knowledge dissemination as the extent of employees' perception of the effective transformation of brand-related knowledge from organization to employee. Internal knowledge dissemination activities of organizations are concerned with transferring the knowledge to employees to appropriately satisfy consumers' needs (King and So, 2015). Furthermore, they argued that organizations have to be serious about effective planning between information generation and communication to employees for brand equity creation.

Knowledge dissemination provides assistance to employees in understanding the rationale behind organizational strategies and guides them to deliver services based on expectations (King and Grace, 2010). Van der Bij et al. (2003) also acknowledged the importance of knowledge dissemination for organizational strategic planning. Organizations can offer a timeline of possible

solutions to deal with internal and external challenges through effective dissemination of information.

Kingston (2012) documented that there are two important dimensions of knowledge dissemination with four different approaches. Moreover, the first dimension contained formal and informal approaches, and the second dimension consisted of "connect" and "collect" approaches. Using formal knowledge dissemination approach, the author performed knowledge dissemination activities within a well-defined structure or set of rules (Billy and To, 2013). In addition, the informal knowledge dissemination approach means the organizational activities for dissemination that are non-structured, and there is no hard and fast set of rules. Kingston (2012) defined the collect approach of knowledge dissemination and said that this is the approach by which the knowledge is assembled and stored in a repository. Furthermore, the author argued that the direct transformation of knowledge between organizations and employees is accounted for under the connect approach of knowledge dissemination. Bharadwaj (2014) also commented on the importance of internal knowledge dissemination and pointed out that internal knowledge dissemination has two main types, namely, as horizontal and vertical dissemination. Furthermore, they elaborated on the horizontal dissemination of knowledge and said that it occurred when employees who kept similar organizational positions transformed the knowledge between each other. Vertical knowledge dissemination occurs either in downward position (from top to bottom) or upward position (from bottom to top) (Stevanović and Gmitrović, 2015).

The above literature on internal knowledge dissemination highlights the vital role of knowledge dissemination in the improvement of employee productivity and organizational performance. The effective internal knowledge dissemination activities of organizations increase the chances of employees' commitment and engagement. Based on the social exchange theory, this study assumes that organizations' internal knowledge dissemination efforts increase EBBE. Employees show positive behavior on a reciprocity basis when organizations put their energies into effective knowledge dissemination. Erkmen (2018) also admitted the positive role of knowledge dissemination in creation of EBBE. Based on the literature, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: *Internal knowledge dissemination has a positive association with employee-based brand equity.*

Emotional Attachment

Burris et al. (2008) noticed that employees' psychological and emotional bond with the values and objectives of organizations is a positive indication of their long-term relationship. Furthermore, they stated that this emotional tie between employees and organizations plays a significant role in achieving the firm's desired goals. Poulis and Wisker (2016) stated that when employees feel identified with organizational values, they put their efforts more enthusiastically into brand management activities. Furthermore, they argued that EBBE is one of the possible outcomes of employee emotional and psychological attachment. Additionally, King and Grace (2010) revealed that these positive attributes of employees have considerable worth in the building process of EBBE.

Hang et al. (2020) stated that emotional attachments could make significant attitudinal and behavioral changes in the stimulus. The emotional attachment of employees rewards the organization with two valuable employee attributes in the form of brand attitude and brand loyalty (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011). Grisaffe and Nguyen (2011) also argued in favor of brand loyalty as the significant consequence of emotional attachment. Furthermore, they stated that emotional attachment is a psychological state deeply rooted in brand involvement, brand attitude, and brand satisfaction. King and Grace (2012) further shed light on important attitudes and behaviors of employees and point out brand commitment and organizational citizenship behavior as important antecedents of employee emotional attachment. Further, they point out three important aspects that can affect the internal brand building management from the employees' perspective. First, organizational socialization is the extent of employees' belief to which they perceive that the overall strategies and environment of the organization are suitable for them to learn values and expectations related to the brand. Piehler et al. (2016) also agreed with the importance of organizational socialization and said that effective internal transformation of organizational brand-building strategies is a valuable organizational attempt for EBBE. Second, relationship orientation could be defined as the degree of positive organizational intentions for retaining the long-term relationships with their employees. Third, employee receptiveness is the extent to employee willingness or readiness to receive the organizational brand-related information, which, in turn, affects their brand-related attitude and behavior (King and Grace, 2012).

Patwardhan and Balasubramanian (2011) acknowledged that "pleasure, arousal, and dominance" are three important dimensions of emotional attachment. Furthermore, they defined the term pleasure and said that it is the extent of stimulus positive emotional state of joy, which he or she feels with some particular brand. Moreover, arousal is the stimulus tendency to encourage others' attitudes in a positive way about the brand. The term dominance describes the extent to which a stimulus feels that the brand becomes an essential part of his or her lifestyle (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011).

The above-discussed literature underlines the importance of emotional attachment role in increasing the performance of employees and the organization. On the basis of signaling theory, this study tries to find out the role of internal knowledge dissemination in the emotional attachment of employees. Organizations' effective internal knowledge dissemination activities are a constructive signal toward employees to enhance their attachment to the brand. Hang et al. (2020) also acknowledged that organizations' communication strategies pave the way for employees' strong bonds with their organization. On the basis of attachment theory, these positive attributes of emotional attachment shape employees' behavior during the creation process of EBBE. Furthermore, this study attempts to check the mediating role of emotional attachment between

knowledge dissemination and EBBE. Based on the literature, this study hypothesizes that:

H2: *Internal knowledge dissemination has a positive association with emotional attachment.*

H3: *Emotional attachment has a positive association with employee-based brand equity.*

H4: *Emotional attachment mediates the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and employee-based brand equity.*

Brand Identification

Vallaster and Lindgreen (2011) identified that efficient delivery of brand promise is employees' responsibility because they have a crucial role in internal brand management strategies. Furthermore, they argued that organizations have to put effort into managing positive employees' attitudes and behaviors for brand-building activities. Employees are the key source for organizations to create a competitive advantage and maintain their sustainability (Piehler et al., 2016). Furthermore, they pointed out that employees' brand identification is an important factor in the EBBE building process. Hassan (2012) defined brand identification as an imperative psychological state of employees that reflects their attachment to the workplace, which influences positively on job-related outcomes. In addition, Piehler et al. (2016) commented that for efficient and effective delivery of brand promise, it is necessary for employees to thoroughly understand the purpose and values of the brand. Furthermore, they stated that without such cognitive recognition, employees cannot participate with their full energies in brand-building process.

According to Kuenzel and Halliday (2008), "prestige, satisfaction, and corporate communications" are three important determinants of brand identification. By prestige, the author means the positive perceptions and opinions of other people about the brand. Furthermore, these positive brand evaluations of other people endorse the thoughts of employees in a positive manner for the creation of brand identification. Satisfaction indicates the emotional and cognitive response of other people toward the brand after purchasing and using it. Moreover, this positive response from people about the brand also helps out employees in brand identification. Corporate communication is the extent to which firms share knowledge in formal or informal ways with each other. This positive management instrument paints a positive picture of the organization in employees' minds and has a positive effect on brand identification (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008).

Hassan (2012) identified "cognitive, affective, and evaluation" as three important components of brand identification. Moreover, cognitive identification indicated the degree to which people related themselves in relation to the organization. Affective identification refers to the extent to which people feel an essential part of a particular organization (Piehler et al., 2016). The evaluative component refers to the extent of employees' evaluation of the brand image and their assessment of the value of organizations (Hassan, 2012). The internal brand management efforts of the organization can play a considerable role in the creation of these three components of brand identification (Piehler et al., 2016).

On the basis of identity theory, this study assumes that employee brand identification increase when organizations effectively disseminate brand-related knowledge to their employees. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) also agreed that effective brand-related knowledge dissemination enhances the brand identification of employees. In addition, this study also attempts to check the influence of employees' brand identification on EBBE. This study also tries to determine the mediating role of brand identification between knowledge dissemination and EBBE. For empirical investigation of these assumptions, **Figure 1** explains this study's research model and thus hypotheses that:

H5: *Internal knowledge dissemination has a positive association with brand identification.*

H6: *Brand identification has a positive association with employee-based brand equity.*

H7: *Brand identification mediates the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and Employee-based brand equity.*

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study applies a convenient sampling technique to collect data for empirical examination of this study model. The data were gathered from employees of top clothing brands in China. To shortlist the top clothing brands, the author first developed a mini questionnaire based on famous top clothing brands and distributed it among 30 male and 30 female final-year students of BBA marketing and asked them which clothing brand they understand as the top. The author also asked for suggestions from respondents regarding other top clothing brand names that the author missed, and according to respondents, these should also be included in this questionnaire. In this way, the author also included other clothing brand names. Second, the author also consulted the results of mini questionnaires with senior researchers, and they acknowledged mini questionnaires' outcomes. In this way, the author shortlisted the top well-known

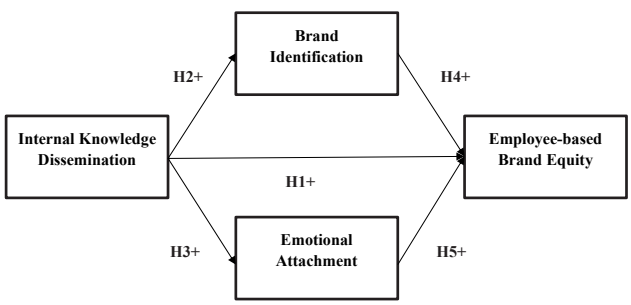

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

brands. The author personally visited the targeted clothing brands and got permission from their managers to address his academic purpose. The author convinced managers by assuring that the data would be utilized only for academic objectives.

Moreover, the author also ensured the managers that the outcomes and practical implications of this research would be shared with them upon their request, and thus most of the managers showed their consent. At the request of the author, managers shared the details of employees. The author targeted 3,000 employees and personally distributed questionnaires among these employees. The questionnaire was developed based on a cover letter. The cover letter explained the objective of the data collection and trusted the employees about their data confidentiality. Moreover, the cover letter also ensures the employees that their answers are not good or bad: "Instead, your actual answer will be considered good, so don't consult with your colleagues for the answer." This step surely boosts up the confidence of the employees so that they fill questionnaires without any hesitation but with their free will. Furthermore, the author adopted a time lag data approach for gathering the data and decided to distribute questionnaires in three turns to reduce the common method bias. Thus, the author designed questionnaires to recognize the same respondents based on hidden codes.

In the first turn, the author distributed demographics and IV- (interdissemination knowledge) related questionnaires and collected 1,919 valid questionnaires out of 3,000. After a 45 days gap, the author distributed questionnaires based on mediator variables (brand identification and emotional attachment). In this second round, the author collected 899 complete questionnaires. After an additional 45 days gap, the author again distributed questionnaires based on DV (EBBE), and in this third round, the author gathered 726 responses. Out of 726 responses, the author found 14 incomplete responses. In this scenario, this study collects 712 complete and valid responses. Hence, the empirical outcomes of this study were based on the 712 sample size.

Measures

The study measures respondents' responses by using 5-point Likert scale. This scale consists of points 1 to 5, where 1 represents "strongly disagree," 2 represents "disagree," 3 represents "neutral," 4 represents "agree," and 5 represents "strongly agree." Previously validated items were adopted to measure this study model's variables. This study measures internal knowledge dissemination with the seven items developed by King and Grace (2010). The sample item includes "The information provided to me when I was employed helped me to understand my role in the context of what the organization is trying to achieve." The variable brand identification was measured with 4 items developed by Boukis and Christodoulides (2020). The sample item includes "My sense of pride toward (my company) brand is reinforced by the brand-related messages." The variable emotional attachment was measured through nine items developed by Patwardhan and Balasubramanian (2011). The sample item includes, "Sometimes I feel I can't control my thoughts as they are obsessively on this brand." The variable EBBE was measured through five items developed by Boukis and Christodoulides (2020). The sample item includes "I always consider the impact on the company's brand when I make decisions."

Demographic Information

This study also assesses the demographic information of the participants. The total number of participants was 712. Out of this, 380 were females, and 332 were males. A total of 180 participants were 20–30 years old, 263 were 31–40 years old, and 141 were 41–50 years old; 51 were above 50 years old; 48 participants have 10–12 years of education; 135 have bachelor's education; 291 have master's education, and 238 have other professional kinds of education. A total of 119 respondents have less than 2 years of experience, 167 have 2–4 years of experience, 233 have 5–7 years of experience, 145 have 8–10 years of experience, and 48 have 11 years and more than 11 years of experience (see **Table 1**).

Results

This study considers the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach by utilizing partial least squares (PLS) to analyze the data. PLS-SEM is a variance-based approach; however, it is different from a covariance-based approach like AMOS (Nawaz et al., 2022), and the main reason behind its adoption is because it is convenient for both confirmatory and exploratory studies (Avotra et al., 2021). SEM depends on covariance-based (CB-SEM) and PLS-SEM methods (Hair et al., 2014). The key variation in both methods is that CB-SEM is useful for accepting and rejecting the theories; conversely, PLS-SEM is useful for advancing and extending the theories (Yingfei et al., 2021). Thus, this study's data were analyzed through the Smart PLS 3.3.3 software. The Smart PLS provides outcomes in two parts: the first part is measurement and the second part is the structural path. Smart PLS also efficiently handles complex or even short sample sizes data analysis.

The measurement of the research framework is based on two parts, namely, reliability and validity. The reliability of the framework mainly depends on standard values of Cronbach's

TABLE 1 | Demographic information.

Categories	Subcategories	Numbers	Percentage
Gender	Male	332	46.6
	Female	380	53.4
Age	20–30 years	180	25.3
	31–40 years	263	36.9
	41–50 years	141	19.8
	51 years or above	128	18.0
Education	Matric to intermediate	48	6.7
	Bachelor	135	19.0
	Master	291	40.9
	Any other	238	33.4
Experience	Less than 2 years	119	16.7
	2 to 4 years	167	23.5
	5 to 7 years	233	32.7
	8 to 10 years	145	20.4
	11 years onward	48	6.7

alpha, roh-A, composite reliability, and average variance extract (Hair et al., 2014, 2016). This study's reliabilities of all variables are presented in **Table 2**. As per the criteria, the acceptable Cronbach's alpha value is up to or above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). This study's research framework variables and Cronbach's alpha values are based on the given criteria. Such as the IV (knowledge dissemination), mediators (brand identification and emotional attachment), and DV (EBBE), Cronbach's alpha values are 0.819, 0.921, 0.867, and 0.914, respectively. However, Cronbach's alpha values are as per the given criteria and thus accepted. The roh-A values of all variables are based on the given criteria. Similar to Cronbach's alpha, the composite reliability criteria are also up to or above 0.7. All variables' composite reliability is also more than 0.7. Thus, this reliability is also accepted. Finally, the average variance extract (AVE) value is acceptable if it is above 0.5. This study models all variables' AVE values are more than 0.5. Thus, this reliability is also accepted.

Furthermore, **Table 2** also presents the outer loadings of all variable items. Values of 0.7 or above 0.7 are considered acceptable for outer loadings (Xiaolong et al., 2021). The items' outer loadings values in this study model are above 0.7 except for two items (**Figure 2**), one item EA9 of mediator variable (emotional attachment). The item EA9 is retained in the model because it is close to 0.7 and does not affect overall model reliability. The second item, EBBE5 of DV (EBBE), was deleted because of lower outer loading.

TABLE 2 | Reliability and validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Item	Outer loadings	VIF	Alpha	roh-A	Composite reliability	AVE
BI	BI1	0.760	1.558	0.819	0.821	0.881	0.650
	BI2	0.799	1.771				
	BI3	0.848	2.279				
	BI4	0.815	2.059				
EA	EA1	0.720	1.847	0.921	0.923	0.934	0.612
	EA2	0.811	2.763				
	EA3	0.790	2.831				
	EA4	0.821	3.172				
	EA5	0.804	2.852				
	EA6	0.845	4.063				
	EA7	0.761	2.391				
	EA8	0.781	2.401				
	EA9	0.698	1.626				
EBBE	EBBE1	0.839	1.774	0.867	0.896	0.907	0.710
	EBBE2	0.872	2.364				
	EBBE3	0.855	2.647				
	EBBE4	0.802	2.360				
IKD	IKD1	0.795	2.045	0.914	0.917	0.932	0.663
	IKD2	0.863	3.033				
	IKD3	0.858	2.950				
	IKD4	0.850	2.889				
	IKD5	0.878	3.334				
	IKD6	0.706	1.615				
	IKD7	0.734	1.757				

BI, brand identification; EA, emotional attachment; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; IKD, internal knowledge dissemination.

Table 2 also explains all variable items' variance inflation factor (VIF) values. The purpose of VIF measurement is to examine the collinearity issue in the model. A VIF value less than 0.5 is considered a fit for the model (Hair et al., 2019). In this study, all variables' items VIF values are in the range of 1.558–3.334. Hence, it is entrusted that the model of this study is free from collinearity issues.

According to Hair et al. (2019), the R^2 value of latent variables up to 0.5 shows moderate strength in the model. This study constructs (brand identification, emotional attachment, and EBBE) R^2 values as 0530, 0.501, and 0.408, respectively. Thus, based on these R^2 values, this study model shows moderate strength. Finally, this study's latent variables also have Q^2 values more than zero. It also revealed this study model's significance.

Fornell-Larcker criterion and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) were applied to check the model discriminant validity in this study (Hair et al., 2016). As per the Fornell-Larker criterion, all constructs' square root of average variance extract values was taken (Fornell and Larcker, 2016; Hair et al., 2016). This study models values of the Fornell-Larker criterion explained in **Table 3**. According to the criteria, all the above values of each column mentioned in **Table 3** should be greater than their lower values in the same column. Hence, this study model fulfills the Fornell-Larker criterion by achieving discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 2016; Hair et al., 2016). As per the HTMT criterion, all construct of models values should be below 0.85 (Hair et al., 2016). This study models construct values of HTMT are presented in **Table 4**, and these values are based on the given threshold as all values are below 0.85. Hence, discriminant validity is appropriate for this study.

Hypotheses Testing

The empirical analysis of this study hypotheses was examined through 5,000 samples of bootstrapping techniques for statistical outcomes, and **Table 5** explains the total direct, indirect, and path outcomes of this study model (Hair et al., 2014, 2016). This study's hypotheses' statistical acceptance and rejection are established on *t*- and *p*-values (Hair et al., 2014). **Table 6** explains the outcomes of this study's hypotheses. H1 of this study predicted the positive direct association between knowledge dissemination and EBBE. Moreover, statistical outcomes ($t = 0.807$, $p = 0.419$) revealed their negative direct association. Hence, as per outcomes, knowledge dissemination negatively influences the EBBE. Thus, H1 is rejected. H2 of this study observed a positive direct relationship between knowledge dissemination and brand identification. According to the statistical outcome ($t = 26.050$, $p = 0.000$), this study confirms that internal knowledge dissemination positively influences brand identification as the path coefficient value reveals that one unit change in internal knowledge dissemination would bring a change of 0.728 in brand identification. Hence, H2 is accepted. H3 of this study expected a positive direct association between internal knowledge dissemination and emotional attachment. The statistical outcomes ($t = 24.267$, $p = 0.000$) reveal that internal knowledge dissemination positively influences the emotional attachment. As per the beta value, one

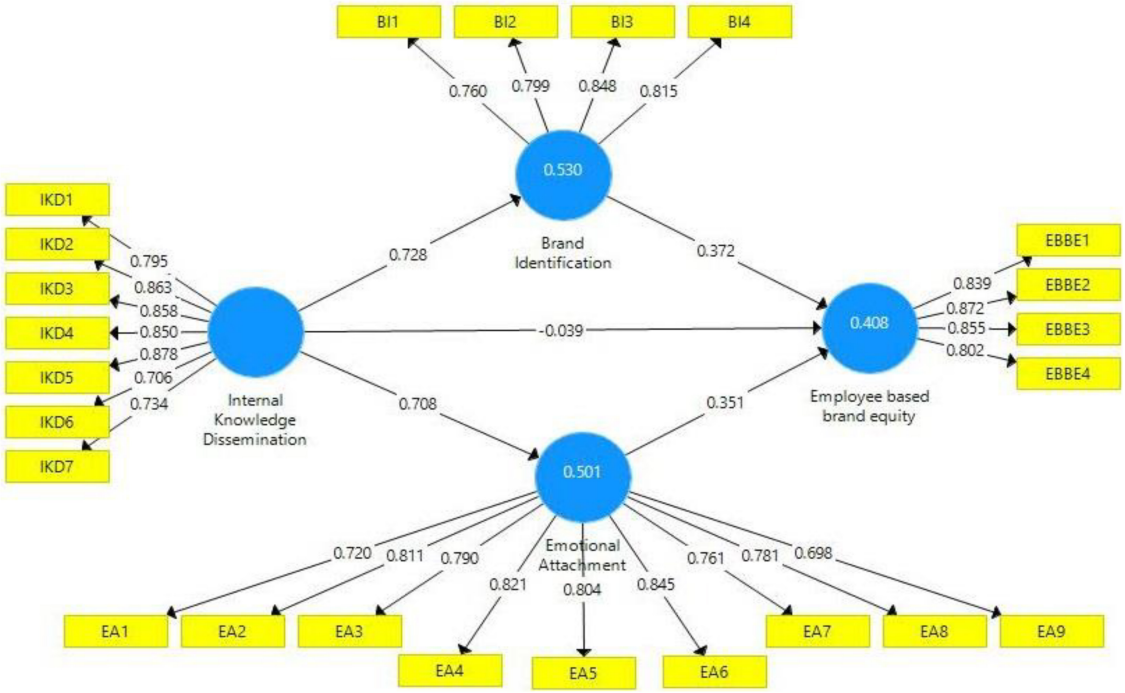

FIGURE 2 | Path estimates.

unit variation in internal knowledge dissemination would lead 0.708 variation in emotional attachment. Thus, H3 is accepted. H4 of this study predicted a positive relationship between brand identification and EBBE. The statistical results (t = 6.405, p = 0.000) explain that brand identification positively influences the EBBE such as according to the path coefficient value; one unit variation in brand identification would bring 0.372 variation in EBBE. Thus, H4 is accepted. H5 of this study expected a positive association between emotional attachment and EBBE and as per statistical outcomes (t = 7.714, p = 0.000); it is confirmed that emotional attachment positively influences the EBBE. The beta value shed light that one unit variation in emotional attachment would lead to 0.351 variation in EBBE. Hence, H5 is accepted.

Moreover, the H6 and H7 expected mediation role of brand identification and emotional attachment between the association of internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. The statistical values (t = 6.291, p = 0.000) of H6 reveal that brand identification positively mediated the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. Hence, H6 is accepted. According to the statistical values (t = 7.352, p = 0.000) of H7, it is confirmed that emotional attachment positively mediated the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. Thus, H7 is accepted. The outcomes of t-values of hypotheses H6 and H7 also revealed that emotional attachment plays the highest mediation role between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE rather than brand identification.

DISCUSSION

Currently, organizations' primary focus is to gain a competitive edge by creating brand equity. Organizations are now realizing the importance of brand equity as it creates competitive advantages and wealth for the organization (Lee et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021). EBBE is a vital construct regarding organizational brand equity, and due to its high importance, this study attempts

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larker-1981 criteria).

Constructs	BI	EA	EBBE	IKD
BI	**0.806**			
EA	0.708	**0.783**		
EBBE	0.593	0.587	**0.843**	
IKD	0.728	0.708	0.481	**0.814**

BI, brand identification; EA, emotional attachment; EBBE, employee based brand equity; IKD, internal knowledge dissemination. The bold values indicate the significance.

TABLE 4 | Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Constructs	BI	EA	EBBE	IKD
BI	–	–	–	–
EA	0.806	–	–	–
EBBE	0.669	0.622	–	–
IKD	0.841	0.762	0.521	–

BI, brand identification; EA, emotional attachment; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; IKD, internal knowledge dissemination.

TABLE 5 | Direct, indirect, and total path estimates.

Direct path	Beta	SD	*t*	*p*
BI - > EBBE	0.372	0.058	6.405	0.000
EA - > EBBE	0.351	0.046	7.714	0.000
IKD - > BI	0.728	0.028	26.050	0.000
IKD - > EA	0.708	0.029	24.267	0.000
IKD - > EBBE	−0.039	0.048	0.807	0.419
Indirect Path				
IKD - > BI - > EBBE	0.271	0.043	6.291	0.000
IKD - > EA - > EBBE	0.249	0.034	7.352	0.000
Total Path				
BI - > EBBE	0.372	0.058	6.405	0.000
EA - > EBBE	0.351	0.046	7.714	0.000
IKD - > BI	0.728	0.028	26.050	0.000
IKD - > EA	0.708	0.029	24.267	0.000
IKD - > EBBE	0.481	0.040	11.883	0.000

BI, brand identification; EA, emotional attachment; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; IKD, internal knowledge dissemination.

TABLE 6 | Hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses		Coefficient (Beta)	S.D	*t*	*p*	Status
H1	IKD - > EBBE	−0.039	0.048	0.807	0.419	Not supported
H2	IKD - > BI	0.728	0.028	26.050	0.000	Supported
H3	IKD - > EA	0.708	0.029	24.267	0.000	Supported
H4	BI - > EBBE	0.372	0.058	6.405	0.000	Supported
H5	EA - > EBBE	0.351	0.046	7.714	0.000	Supported
Mediation hypotheses		**Coefficient (Beta)**	**S.D**	***t***	***p***	**Status**
H6	IKD - > BI - > EBBE	0.271	0.043	6.291	0.000	Supported
H7	IKD - > EA - > EBBE	0.249	0.034	7.352	0.000	Supported

BI, brand identification; EA, emotional attachment; EBBE, employee-based brand equity; IKD, internal knowledge dissemination.

to find out the brand-building process from employees' perspectives. This study proposes that internal knowledge dissemination positively predicts the EBBE based on the social exchange theory. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) argued the importance of knowledge dissemination regarding EBBE. This study also predicts that brand identification and emotional attachment mediate the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE.

Moreover, on the basis of signaling theory, this study also assesses the direct association between internal knowledge dissemination and brand identification, internal knowledge and emotional attachment, brand identification and EBBE, and emotional attachment and EBBE. For this purpose, this study proposes seven hypotheses (**Table 6**). First, H1 of this study predicted a positive association between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE, but this study finds that internal knowledge dissemination negatively influences the EBBE. Hence, H1 was not as per the prediction of this study, thus rejected. Second, H2 of this study has been developed to explore the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and brand identification. The outcomes revealed that internal brand dissemination positively impacts brand identification. Third, H4 predicted the direct positive association between brand identification and EBBE. The outcomes of this study were based on the prediction, such as brand identification positively influencing the EBBE. Fourth, the H3 of this study predicted a positive association between internal knowledge dissemination and emotional attachment. The results of this study were aligned with the prediction that internal knowledge dissemination has a positive impact on emotional attachment. Fifth, H5 of this study expected a positive relationship between emotional attachment and EBBE.

The outcomes of this study revealed that emotional attachment positively influences the EBBE. Hence, H5 outcomes were also based on the prediction. Moreover, this study also assesses the mediating role of brand identification and emotional attachment between the association of internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. For this purpose, this study examines H6 and H7, and the results revealed that brand identification and emotional attachment positively mediated the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. Hence, the outcomes of this study, H5 and H6, were based on the prediction. Even though this study finds a negative association between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE, this study's outcomes revealed the importance of brand identification and employees' emotional attachment. Both are significant mediators between the relationship of internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study has various theoretical and practical implications. This study extends the theoretical literature on EBBE in a significant way. First, this study examines the direct association between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE and found negative consequences. This study finds that such outcomes may be due to poor management and policies. Second, this study examines the direct association of internal knowledge dissemination with brand identification and found positive outcomes such as employee brand identification increased through organizational internal knowledge dissemination. Third, this study also assesses the direct association of internal knowledge dissemination with employees' emotional attachment and found positive outcomes such as employees' emotional attachment to the brand positively increased by organizational internal knowledge dissemination. Hence, this study extends the literature on internal knowledge dissemination as a developer of employees' brand identification and brand emotional attachment. Fourth, this study also extends the literature by building the relationship between brand identification and EBBE. The outcomes confirm that brand identification works as a booster of EBBE. Fifth, this study confirms that emotional attachment also enhances EBBE. Hence, this study extends the literature on emotional attachment. Moreover, this study finds emotional attachment and brand identification as mediators in the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. This study extends the literature on brand identification and emotional attachment as mediators between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. Practically, this study guides managers as this study finds

internal knowledge dissemination as an essential construct for organizations. Even though its direct association with EBBE was not positive, brand identification and emotional attachment can play a role as a game-changer in building EBBE. Through organizations' rational internal knowledge dissemination, organizations can boost employees' brand identification and brand emotional attachment. Consequently, for the building of EBBE, organizations rationally disseminate internal knowledge among their employees. The complete and proper knowledge of the employees about their company brands creates identification and emotional attachment, which positively develops employee brand-building equity.

LIMITATIONS

This study has limitations, which have the opportunities for further studies. First, this study collects data for empirical analysis through a questionnaire survey method; future research may collect data by applying other methods such as interviews. Second, this study applies a time lag data approach for data collection to avoid common method bias. Future research can collect data in different ways to avoid common methods bias, such as including marker variables or adding reverse coded items in variable scales. Third, this study collects data from clothing brands. Future research may enlarge the data size or adopt longitudinal data methods to confirm this study outcomes. Fourth, this study collects data from the secondary sector; the author encourages future researchers to conduct a similar study by collecting data from other sectors like primary or territory. This step also helps to verify this study outcomes. Fifth, this study does not include a moderator variable between the direct association of internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE, maybe a moderator effect turns this negative relationship into a positive relationship. Future studies may check the moderator effect of top management support, leader-member exchange, and organizational culture between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. Sixth, future studies may extend our study model by examining other mediators, such as brand knowledge and employee absorptive capacity. Finally, this study was conducted in China, and future research may conduct a similar study in other developing or developed countries, especially in western countries.

CONCLUSION

Organizations have to face competition from their national and international competitors, and employee-based branding has a vital role in creating a competitive edge. Branding is a significant organizational tool to enhance performance and differentiate themselves in dynamic markets. Hence, organizations can achieve a competitive edge through building EBBE. For this purpose, this study develops an empirical model and examined internal knowledge dissemination's role in promoting EBBE. This study examines the direct relationships between internal knowledge dissemination and brand identification, internal knowledge dissemination and emotional attachment, brand identification and EBBBE, and emotional attachment and EBBE. Moreover, this study also assesses a mediating role of brand identification and emotional attachment in this relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and EBBE. This study depicts that organizations, through their rational internal knowledge dissemination, can develop employees' emotional attachment and band identification and, by building these organizations, can enhance EBBE.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

HL conceived, designed the concept, and wrote the manuscript. The author read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The Interplay of Servant Leader and Interpersonal Trust in Predicting Employee-Based Brand Equity: Moderating Role of Ethical Work Climate

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Although servant leadership may be equipped to provide a leadership model that addresses the issues of the modern workforce, little literature is available regarding the relationship between servant leadership and employee brand-based equity. This study contends to address this gap for which data have been collected from the service industry under a cross-sectional research design by distributing 410 questionnaires among the participants, out of which 337 were received back. After discarding the partially filled and incomplete responses, the useable responses were 314. Data were analyzed via the Smart PLS approach by applying the structural equation modeling technique. Results indicate that servant leadership directly increased the employee-based brand equity by the mediating role of interpersonal trust. However, this study has not established the moderating role of an ethical work climate.

Keywords: employee brand based equity, servant leadership, interpersonal trust, ethical work climate, work culture

INTRODUCTION

Employee-based brand equity (EBBE) is a fairly new concept that was first used in 1999. It has been used as the subject of numerous books and articles (Keller, 1999; Thomson et al., 1999). Due to the growing importance of internal branding, this concept is expanding to different kinds of corporate brands, including services and business-to-business (B2B) and non-profit industries. The importance of media and marketing is lower in these markets, while the importance of human interaction is greater (Chen et al., 2014; Schwarz et al., 2016). Employees are an integral part of the human resources of any organization, so their mutual interaction plays a significant role in shaping the performance of an organization. It is also generalized that the employees are the brand messengers, so they contribute to creating strong brand equity of respective organizations (Schmidt and Baumgarth, 2018).

Enough scientific work has looked into the relationship between internal brand management (IBM) and brand performance (BP). The majority of studies indicate that IBM has a positive impact on BP (Baumgarth, 2009; Burmann et al., 2009). This indicates that improved BP is a possible outcome of EBBE. To develop EBBE in an organization, potential areas of interest are identified as leadership, communication, and human resource management (Wentzel et al., 2010). Therefore, it becomes more important to address how leadership can boost internal brand management. While previously, empirical research was carried out to assess the impact of leadership on communication, less attention was paid to scientific understanding of the influence of leadership on brand equity (Rehmet and Dinnie, 2013; Schmidt and Baumgarth, 2018; Koch and Gyrd-Jones, 2019).

This synergy relates to the phenomenon of hunter-gatherer requirements studied in evolutionary leadership biology by Vugt and Ronay (2013). Vugt and Ronay (2013) reveal that humans are evolving and the leadership in organizations is also evolving, but several hunter-gatherer requirements are not met. Employees follow their leaders intimately in hunter-gatherer communities, so there remains no distinction between leaders' personal and social selves (Vugt and Ronay, 2013). Till now, businesses are dealing with smaller and hunter-gatherer communities. The massive administrative enterprises require something like a flexible workforce from across the Globe. To achieve this, enterprises require a sense of tribal membership, which modern organizations frequently fail to provide (Vugt and Ronay, 2013). To overcome this deficit, servant leadership provides a culture of social identity among the members. This is achieved by forming teams that resemble brotherhood in hunter-gatherer societies. In this manner, team members support and grow the ability of others (Yoshida et al., 2014).

Servant leadership has the scope to provide a leadership model which addresses the issues of the modern workforce while somehow satisfying our hunter-gatherer desires for affiliation (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership is a comprehensive leadership approach that involves followers on numerous levels (e.g., interpersonal, moral, psychological, and intellectual). Hence, servant leadership can provide grounds for the employees to function to their full potential. The primary goal is to build an employees' workforce based on the leaders' humanitarian and moral motivations (Jones, 2018). Whenever the wellbeing or progress of employees is prioritized, leaders become more productive and engaged at work. It is also supported by the fact that servant leaders are the ones who consider themselves to be custodians of the organizations they work for van Dierendonck (2010).

Servant leaders strive to increase the financial and other resources given to them. As a result, despite focusing on their employees' personal development, they do not neglect performance demands. The performance-oriented leadership frequently sacrifices individuals on the altar of revenue and development. In contrast to this kind of leadership, servant leadership focuses on long-term performance (Sendjaya, 2015). Servant leadership research can be divided into two stages. First, the study concentrates on the theoretical evolution of servant leadership, with (Spears's, 1996; Thakore's, 2013) works as examples. Second, the investigations focus on building servant leadership metrics and using cross-sectional research to investigate links between servant leadership and consequences.

Researchers are currently working in the model development phase of servant leadership. In this phase, more sophisticated research strategies are being used to go over simple findings to investigate the precursors, mediation pathways, and model parameters of servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Authors believe that a study on the impacts of servant leadership is necessary for certain reasons. First, studies have confirmed the empirical and theoretical distinction of servant leadership from the other kinds of leadership based on Graham's (1991) work which laid the foundation for the creation of servant leadership theory (Schaubroeck et al., 2011; Hoch et al., 2016). Secondly, despite the growing interest in academic research on servant leadership, there is a lack of consistency and coherence in the field of servant leadership and its impacts on the outcomes of employees.

Extensive research in servant leadership can contribute significantly to other fields, such as healthcare, hospitality, and education. In addition, research indicates that servant leadership works well in the non-profit, governmental, and youth domains (Schaubroeck et al., 2011; Waterman, 2011; Eva and Sendjaya, 2013; Neubert et al., 2016). No prior research has ever evaluated the influence of servant leadership on employee-based brand equity. Therefore, the current study fills this gap by assessing the influence of servant leadership on EBBE. There are some factors that help in developing EBBE, which are utilized in the current research as well. Including these factors, interpersonal trust is highlighted. The positive anticipation that everyone will add to his/her general wellbeing without inflicting harm is referred to as interpersonal trust (Latif et al., 2022).

It is assessed that humans' behavioral patterns are influenced by interpersonal trust (Karahanna et al., 2005; Simpson, 2007). Interpersonal trust is defined by individuals understanding their susceptibility, behavioral risks, and positive expectations from others. This is common in circumstances wherein interpersonal trust plays an important role. People's fear of being used by others is reduced by interpersonal trust, which encourages collaboration (Yamagishi and Sato, 1986; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau, 1998). Seemingly, employees are more inclined to follow social rules if they believe everyone else will follow them. Furthermore, interpersonal trust aids in the formation of community collaborations to respond to tough conditions, as well as aids in the acceptability of future solutions (Afsar et al., 2021; Hasche et al., 2021).

The relationship of employees with their employers is influenced by personal and organizational factors. So, interpersonal trust is an important component of successful and sustainable human relationships in an organization. In organizational management, it is described as an employee's conviction in the authenticity of another employee (Asamani, 2015). Kim and Park (2019) utilized interpersonal trust as a mediator in the empirical investigation between organizational learning and transformational leadership. The gap arose in evaluating interpersonal trust as a mediator in the context of servant leadership. Therefore, the authors tried to figure

out the connecting link between servant leadership and EBBE. Employees in service firms frequently fall into unethical activities, such as taking the company's equipment, concealing errors throughout the service delivery system, and handling customers inappropriately. This approach can lead to the undermining of the existing product or service quality of their firms.

This example emphasizes the need for creating an ethical work environment to reduce and avoid the wrong doing of employees (Kim and Koo, 2017). Ethical work climate is defined as having predominant impressions of organizational behaviors and processes which include ethical concerns (Victor and Cullen, 1988). Empirical research shows that having an ethical work environment encourages employees to act ethically (Teng et al., 2020). Based on this assumption, the authors tried to find out the moderating impact of the ethical work climate between servant leadership and EBBE. This research addresses certain aspects such as the role of servant leadership in developing employee-based brand equity with the help of interpersonal trust among employees. This research also focuses on the moderating role of ethical work climate in organizations to develop employee-based brand equity.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT AND HYPOTHESIS

Servant Leadership Theory

Greenleaf's (1979) work established the concept of servant leadership theory. According to Greenleaf (1979), the fundamental responsibility of the servant leader is to serve. It originates with the fundamental sensation that one who desires to serve should start serving first. Then, by making a conscious decision, one might aim to lead (Farling et al., 1999). Furthermore, Greenleaf argued that leaders who want to lead first, rather than serve, are doing so out of a desire for control, authority, and personal benefit (Rachmawati and Lantu, 2014). It has been suggested that a leader's attributes, rather than their professional development plan, determine whether they choose to lead or assist first (Russell and Gregory Stone, 2002).

Leadership style demonstrates the focus of leaders on the organization and is inadequate to describe conduct, that is, humanistic or follower-oriented. Hence, servant leadership theory, which is follower-oriented and focused, explains such behavior (Farling et al., 1999). These characteristics define the servant leader, who is influenced by virtues from within (constructs). These ethical constructions shape the mindsets, qualities, and behaviors of servant leaders (van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011).

Servant Leadership Is Positively Related to Employee Brand-Based Equity

Servant leadership is a management strategy for managing people that includes the employees on different levels (e.g., social, moral, psychological, and intellectual). It can enhance the full capabilities of the employees (Lumpkin and Achen, 2018). Most of the other previous researchers also investigated such connections between servant leadership and management integrity in employees (Toor and Ofori, 2009). Servant leadership used to have a direct influence on the development of employee-based brand equity (Hanaysha and Al-Shaikh, 2021).

Based on this hypothesis, this study attempted to investigate the significance of servant leadership, which is a form of leadership oriented toward a positive impact on employee-based brand equity. The study of performance-based investigations was proposed to analyze the impact of servant leadership in establishing employee-based brand equity (Johnson et al., 2018). The growing significance of the brand's internal foundation might well be linked to the brand concept's expansion to cover traditionally restricted areas, such as services, companies, and non-profit organizations (Brydges and Pugh, 2021).

The contingent incentive part of transactional and transformational leadership is servant leadership with mission leadership (Brown et al., 2020). Employees are, indeed, key brand components, primary drivers of brand equity, and positive brand communicators (Castañeda-García et al., 2019). Therefore, servant leadership is positively related to employee-based brand equity.

H1: *Servant leadership is positively related to employee brand-based equity.*

Servant Leadership Is Positively Related to Interpersonal Trust

Servant leadership (SEL) is defined as "an idea and practice of leadership that prioritizes the good among those led over through the self-interest of the leader, stressing leader behaviors that focus upon follower growth, and de-emphasizing glorify of the leader (Tuan, 2022)." Servant leaders are those who lead with a concentration on the supporters, with the believers as the primary concern and organizational matters as a secondary concern (Irving, 2011). The servant-leader constructions are attributes, which are described as a person's excellent moral qualities, general decency, or moral perfection (Gu et al., 2022). According to the studies related to human relations, interpersonal trust is a key component of successful and long-lasting human partnerships (Afridi et al., 2020).

The interpersonal trust may impact human behavioral patterns (Li and Hsu, 2018). Cooperation among people is widespread in situations where interpersonal trust is vital, as described by individuals recognizing their sensitivity, behavioral risks, and favorable expectations of others (Fischer et al., 2019). Interpersonal trust reduces people's fear of being one of those others, which increases collaboration (Lei et al., 2019). Users appear to be more likely to observe social rules if they feel everyone else should (Castelli and Sarvary, 2021). Moreover, interpersonal trust contributes to the establishment of community partnerships to respond to difficult circumstances, and also facilitates the acceptance and effectiveness of future solutions (Tsai and Hung, 2019).

H2: *Servant leadership is positively related to interpersonal trust.*

Interpersonal Trust Is Positively Related to Employee Brand-Based Equity

According to the social exchange theory, a person may be pleased to develop an exchange connection with others by willingly providing advantages to others first and then anticipating future rewards (Zhang and Liu, 2021). In theory, trust is a necessary component of a social exchange relationship (Boateng et al., 2019). The greater the social exchange connection between the sender and the recipient, the greater the degree of trust regarded by both parties (Greenberg and Dillman, 2021). When an employee chooses to share organizational information, interpersonal trust becomes critical (Hasche et al., 2021).

However, connections between workers and management are essential in the workplace, therefore trust of the supervisor (TOS) should be included when describing employees' knowledge-sharing habits (Venters and Wood, 2007). Despite the hypothesized influence of supervisor trust, the actual results are equivocal due to potential methodological differences (Tan et al., 2020). It is vital to reconsider the effects of confidence in colleagues as well as trust in supervisors on knowledge-sharing behavior (Usmanova et al., 2021).

H3: *Interpersonal trust is positively related to employee brand-based equity.*

Mediating Relationship Between Servant Leadership and Employee Brand-Based Equity

The influence of the servant style of leadership on job satisfaction and turnover intention is investigated by looking at the consecutive mediating effects of employer brand perception (Bharadwaj et al., 2021). The main goal of this study is to investigate and evaluate how servant leadership impacts an individual's withdrawal cognitions, that is, turnover intentions, by maintaining a positive organizational image as just an employer brand image in the mind of current employees and therefore by creating an environment in which employees support the government they work for Mostafa et al. (2021). Literature reinforces the theory that an employee's view of a Servant leadership style leads to a variety of critical organizational outcomes, including organizational commitment (Faraz et al., 2021). Initial empirical data on the function of organizational identity establish its role in moderating the influence of servant leadership on critical organizational outcomes (Lv et al., 2022).

The leadership's responsibility is to establish a favorable business identity (Lythreatis et al., 2021). Leadership styles have a critical role in transforming a corporate identity into a favorable organizational image (Verma and Kumar, 2021). In general, interpersonal trust is defined as a person's belief in the sincerity of another individual's interpersonal trust as something of an empirical mediator (Kistyanto et al., 2021). Even though there was a deficit in analyzing interpersonal trust as a mediator in the framework of servant leadership, we attempted to identify the connecting relationship between servant leadership and employee-based brand equity (Johnson, 2021).

Ethical work climate is defined by Tehranineshat et al. (2020) as a collective employee concept of ethical activities, ethical practices, and ethical procedures that are influenced by two components: the ethical eligibility requirements used for management decision making and the linkage disequilibrium of analysis used as a referent in the ethical judgment procedure (Kim and Vandenberghe, 2020). This article demonstrates the need for establishing an ethical workplace culture to decrease and avoid misbehavior (McKendall et al., 2002).

An ethical work environment is described as "having dominating perceptions of typical organizational behaviors and activities that have ethical substance" (Fein et al., 2021). According to scientific investigations, having an ethical work atmosphere helps people to act ethically (Ariail et al., 2021). We attempted to determine the moderating influence of an ethical work atmosphere on servant leadership and EBBE based on this premise (Khan and Khan, 2021). This research just aims at the function of servant leadership in generating employee-based brand equity with the support of both interpersonal trust and mutual understanding (Jung et al., 2021). As a result, the authors suggest the following research hypotheses:

H4: *Interpersonal trust mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee brand-based equity.*
H5: *Ethical work climate moderates the relationship between servant leadership and employee brand-based equity.*

The following conceptual model (**Figure 1**) has been formed based on the above findings and hypotheses.

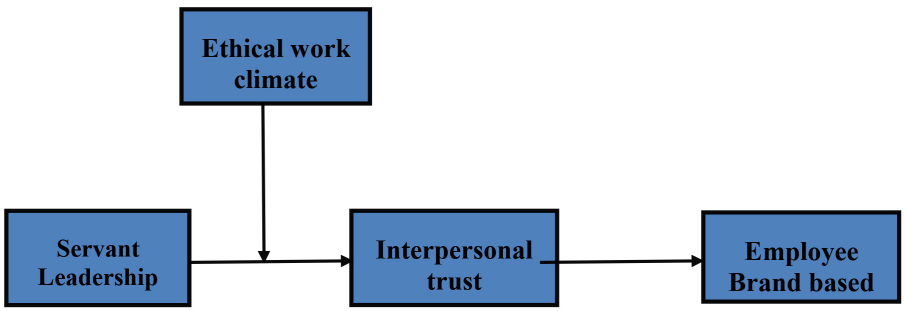

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

We have opted to use a cross-sectional design in this study to obtain data from the participants. The use of cross-sectional research design is common, and in the past, many researchers have used this design in their studies (e.g., see Hao et al., 2020a,b; Nawaz et al., 2021). Further, the survey method is based on the cross-sectional research design, and the data are collected by the convenience sampling technique. This sampling method provides easy access to data collection and is cost-effective in collecting data from a large pool of respondents. Previously, several researchers have used this technique in their studies (Avotra et al., 2021; Yingfei et al., 2021). This technique is based on the non-probability sampling technique, which is most commonly used in cross-sectional studies.

Considering the study's theoretical orientation, service sector employees were approached for data collection, and the banking industry was selected as the target industry. All bank employees, that is, frontline employees and branch and operation managers, were requested to fill out the survey questionnaires. Before administrating questionnaires to the employees, formal approval was obtained from the in-charge/managers. In addition to this, written informed consent was also obtained from the participants. To boost the motivation of the survey participants, we offered them a discounted meal coupon. Approaching a reasonable audience for data collection is crucial in survey-based research; thus, we have followed a well-known and well-established benchmark of sample size recommended by Tehranineshat et al. (2020) and set minimum sample size of 384. Several researchers have used this criterion to devise a reasonable sample size (Bashir et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022).

To be safer, we distributed 410 questionnaires among the participants and asked them to fill the questionnaire at their ease. A follow-up message was sent to them after 1 week, and after that, they were approached again for the collection of questionnaires. Of the distributed questionnaires, 337 were received back. After discarding the partially filled and incomplete responses, the useable responses were 314. In cross-sectional studies, the issue of common method biases could arise, and it can shatter the findings. This study attempted to reduce the common method bias by following various measures. Previous researchers have used different methods to address this issue, from using negative questions/reverse-coded questions to changing the place of scale items in questionnaires. So, we used negative questions to restrict the participants from responding in a monotonic manner. To increase the participants' confidence, we ensured them that this study was for educational purposes and is used only for research purposes. In addition to this, we changed the place of scale items so that respondents could not develop a correlation among the study constructs.

Scales/Measurement

The Likert scale provides a meaningful and helpful way to record perception. Usually, a five-point Likert Scale is used in the cross-sectional studies, and this study followed the five-point Likert Scale with a score ranging from 5 to 1, where 5 indicates strongly agree and 1 denotes strongly disagree. The predictor in this study is operationalized based on 13 items developed previously (Dennis and Bocarnea, 2005). A sample item for this scale includes, "The level of trust my leader places in me increases my commitment to the organization," and "My leader trusts me to keep a secret." This scale illustrates the leader's behavior in terms of their focus as a steward of the organization, increasing subordinate interactions as a mission of responsibility. Previously, this scale has been used by other researchers (Latif et al., 2022).

The mediating variable of this study (interpersonal trust) is operationalized based on a six-item scale developed previously (Cook and Wall, 1980). This scale is divided into two dimensions: one indicates trust in peers, while the other dimension indicates trust in management. Both dimensions are measured based on three items each. A sample item for trust in peers includes, "I can trust the people I work with to lend me a hand if I need it," and sample items for trust in management include, "Management at my firm is sincere in its attempts to meet the employees' point of view." The outcome variable in this study is measured using a five-item scale developed previously (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). This scale measures the employee's perception regarding their brand-based equity. The sample item for this scale is "I am aware that everything I say or do can affect the brand image." The scale used to measure the moderating variable, that is, the ethical climate, was obtained from a previous study (Arnaud, 2010). This scale originally contained 18 items with 6 dimensions. We selected the most relevant dimensions of this scale, that is, moral awareness, collective moral motivation, and character. Three items for each dimension and nine items have been used for this scale in this study.

RESULTS AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Assessment of Measurement and Structural Model

Owning to the complex nature of the framework, we utilized a multivariate data analysis tool. We analyzed the data using the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique and the Smart PLS 3.9 software (Yingfei et al., 2021). Smart PLS, in this regard, was the best available choice because it deals with the non-normal data very comfortably, and the issue of small sample size is dealt with very conveniently through bootstrapping approach (Hair et al., 2017). As in the case of brand-based equity in terms of employees, the theory is under development, and it was best suited to use the partial least square approach (Hair et al., 2014).

Initially, the measurement model was assessed for reliability and validity (see **Table 1**). Reliability was assessed through "Cronbach's alpha, rho-a, and composite reliability (CR)," while validity was assessed through convergent and discriminant validity. First, the reliability parameters were found within the acceptable range (i.e., >0.60), which indicates that reliability was established. The reliability values indicated that higher reliability was observed in the case of servant leadership, which was 0.931. Similarly, other reliability parameters, such as rho-A and composite reliability, indicated a good level of reliability (Hair et al., 2011; Bashir et al., 2020).

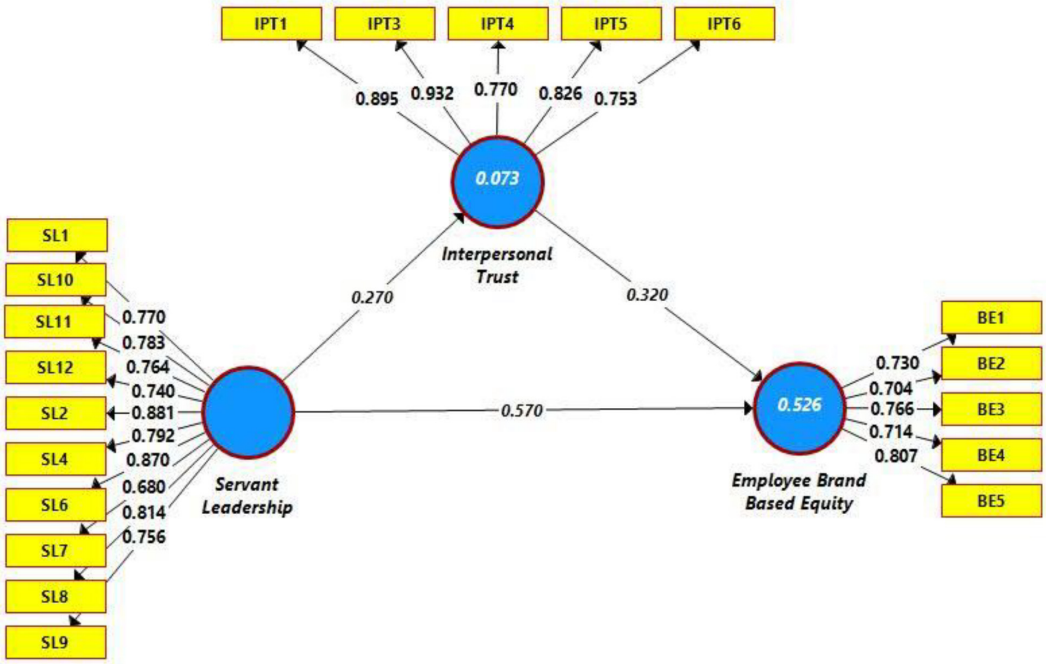

FIGURE 2 | Path estimates.

TABLE 1 | Reliability and convergent validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Indicator	FL	VIF	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	AVE
EBBE	BE1	0.730	1.221	0.814	0.853	0.862	0.555
	BE2	0.704	2.077				
	BE3	0.766	2.952				
	BE4	0.714	1.422				
	BE5	0.807	3.979				
IPT	IPT1	0.895	2.898	0.898	0.981	0.921	0.703
	IPT3	0.932	4.576				
	IPT4	0.770	2.071				
	IPT5	0.826	5.201				
	IPT6	0.753	4.099				
SL	SL1	0.770	2.102	0.931	0.941	0.942	0.619
	SL10	0.783	3.579				
	SL11	0.764	3.778				
	SL12	0.740	3.183				
	SL2	0.881	4.666				
	SL4	0.792	3.546				
	SL6	0.870	3.564				
	SL7	0.680	1.784				
	SL8	0.814	4.790				
	SL9	0.756	3.423				

EBBE, Employee brand-based equity; IPT, Interpersonal trust; SL, Servant leadership.

Indicator reliability was assessed based on outer loadings. **Table 1** illustrates the indicator reliability. The obtained values were within the acceptable limits (>0.708), except for BE-2 and SL-7 values, which were slightly low compared to the benchmark value. Indicators with these lower loadings were retained because the AVE of the respective construct was higher than the desired value (>0.50). AVE of employee-based brand equity was 0.555, while AVE of servant leadership was 0.619. Thus, these constructs indicated more than 50% variance. However, some items for servant leadership and interpersonal trust were dropped due to poor outer loadings (values less than 0.40). One item from the interpersonal trust (IPT-2) and three items (SL-3, SL-5, and SL-13) were dropped from the analysis due to poor outer loadings (**Figure 2**). Thus, both outer loadings and AVE of the constructs (illustrated in **Table 1**) were within the acceptable range, and convergent validity was established (Mela and Kopalle, 2002).

TABLE 2 | Discriminant validity [Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria].

Construct	Employee brand based equity	Interpersonal trust	Servant leadership
Employee brand based equity	0.745	–	–
Interpersonal trust	0.474	0.838	–
Servant leadership	0.656	0.270	0.787

While discussing discriminant validity, we used two well-established criteria, that is, Fornell and Larcker (1981) and HTMT ratios (Hair et al., 2017). First, **Table 2** illustrates that the square root of the AVE of all the three constructs is higher than the correlational values in the respective column and row (diagonal). These findings established discriminant validity through the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria (Sarstedt et al., 2014).

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Construct	Employee brand based equity	Interpersonal trust	Servant leadership
Employee brand based equity	–	–	–
Interpersonal trust	0.524	–	–
Servant leadership	0.615	0.260	–

TABLE 4 | Direct, indirect, and total path estimates.

Direct path	Beta	SD	*t*	*p*
Interpersonal trust → employee brand based equity	0.320	0.038	8.325	0.000
Servant leadership → employee brand based equity	0.570	0.034	16.616	0.000
Servant leadership → interpersonal trust	0.270	0.054	4.999	0.000
Specified indirect path				
Servant leadership → interpersonal trust → employee brand based equity	0.086	0.019	4.461	0.000
Total path				
Servant leadership → employee brand based equity	0.656	0.029	22.956	0.000

With regard to HTMT ratios, **Table 3** illustrates that HTMT ratios in all columns are less than 0.90, thus establishing the discriminant validity. In this case, both the conservative and liberal criteria of HTMT are observed because the values of HTMT are also less than 0.85 (**Table 4**).

Additionally, we also assessed the issue of multicollinearity (assessed through VIF), and all the observed values were within the acceptable range (**Table 1**). Additionally, we also evaluated the coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect size (f^2) as a tool to assess the structural model before testing the hypothesis. First, the effect size was good (0.079–0.635). These effect sizes are large enough and indicate a reasonable effect size to assess the model's fitness. Moreover, we also evaluated the percentage of change by calculating R^2. In this regard, 53% change was observed in employee-based brand equity through servant leadership and interpersonal trust, while 7% change was observed in interpersonal trust due to servant leadership (Hair et al., 2006; Bashir et al., 2020), which is evident from **Figures 2**, **3** (Hair et al., 2017). The predictive relevance (Q^2) was found to be satisfactory because the obtained value of Q^2 was larger than zero (Geisser, 1975).

Hypothesis testing was done in two ways: the direct and mediating hypotheses were tested through SEM, while the moderation hypothesis was tested based on Process Macro. **Table 5** illustrates the results of hypotheses testing. The first hypothesis of this study, which is related to the relationship between servant leadership and employee-based brand equity, was found to be statistically significant because the *t* and *p* values were found to be significant ($t = 16.616$, $p < 0.00$, and $B = 0.570$), also illustrated in **Figure 3**. The value of coefficient of regression indicates that one unit change in servant leadership will cause a change of 0.570 units in employee-based brand equity, thus H1 is supported through the statistical approach. Similarly, the impact of servant leadership on interpersonal trust is statistically significant ($t = 4.999$, $p < 0.00$, and $B = 0.270$). Here, the coefficient value indicates that one unit change in servant leadership will cause a change of 0.270 units in interpersonal trust, thus H2 is supported. Similarly, the third hypothesis of this study was related to the impact of interpersonal trust on employee-based brand equity, which was found to be statistically significant (as evident from p and t statistics). The values of p and t were within the threshold limits, thus H3 is also supported. When considering mediation indirect effect, that is, servant leadership–interpersonal trust–employee brand-based equity, the indirect impact was statistically significant, indicating that servant leadership promoted interpersonal trust, which further increased employee brand-based equity.

DISCUSSION

Several researchers discovered empirical and conceptual evidence for the diverse effectiveness of servant leadership. In recent years, this body of empirical research has grown significantly, resulting in non-transparency and complexity in the domain of servant leadership. A rise in performance is one potential effect of servant leadership that has been widely explored (Liden et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2016). The evaluation of performance-based investigations suggested evaluating the role of servant leadership in building employee-based brand equity. Growing evidence from recent literature suggested that internal brand management, which develops employee-based brand equity, is the contributor to outer brand performance (Baumgarth, 2009; Burmann et al., 2009). It was also noted that leadership along with human resources is a major player in managing a brand internally, and it could develop the brand more firmly (Wentzel et al., 2010).

Based on the above-mentioned findings, this study tried to explore the role of servant leadership, which is a type of leadership toward the development of employee-based brand equity. This research also focused to assess the mediating impact of interpersonal trust between servant leadership and employee-based brand equity. Furthermore, the moderating role of ethical work climate was also assessed in the current research. The results provided significant foundations for the suggested concept. For this reason, direct impacts, such as servant leadership to employee-based brand equity, servant leadership to interpersonal trust, and interpersonal trust to employee-based equity, were analyzed. Similarly, indirect effects were also a focus of the study, which included the mediating role of interpersonal trust between servant leadership and employee-based brand equity and the moderating role of ethical work climate for developing employee-based brand equity.

The direct results indicated that servant leadership directly influenced the development of employee-based brand equity. These results are possibly the reason that leadership at this level motivates the employees to work hard for their organizations. Servant leadership can understand and address the concerns of

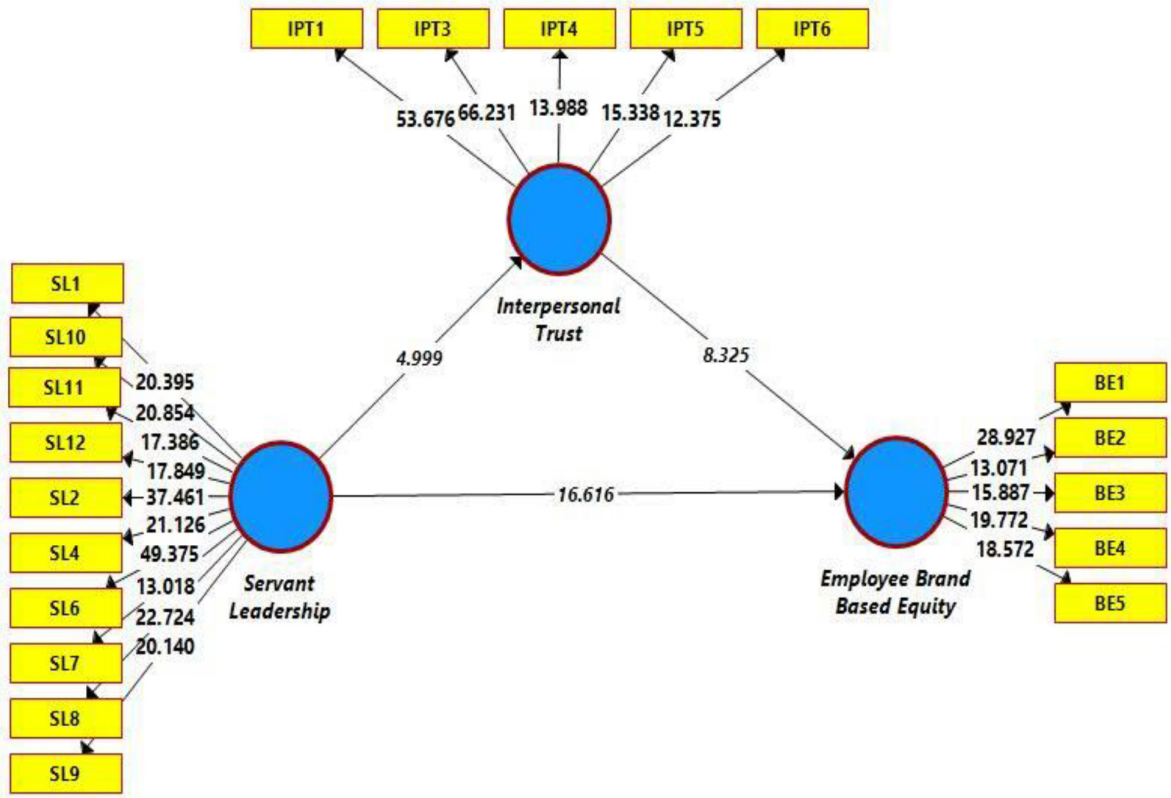

FIGURE 3 | Path significance.

TABLE 5 | Hypotheses testing.

	Hypotheses	Coefficient (Beta)	SD	*t*	*p*	Status
H1	Servant leadership → employee brand based equity	0.570	0.034	16.616	0.000	Supported
H2	Servant leadership → interpersonal trust	0.270	0.054	4.999	0.000	Supported
H3	Interpersonal trust → employee brand based equity	0.320	0.038	8.325	0.000	Supported
	Mediation hypothesis	**Coefficient (Beta)**	**SD**	***t***	***p***	**Status**
H4	Servant leadership → interpersonal trust → employee brand based equity	0.086	0.019	4.461	0.000	Supported
	Moderation hypothesis	**Coefficient (Beta)**	***f***	***Df1***	***Df2***	**Status**
H5	Servant leadership × ethical climate → employee brand based equity	0.006	2.499	1.000	347.000	Not supported

modern employees of current times and satisfies our hunter-gatherer desires for affiliation (Eva et al., 2019). The effects of servant leadership on interpersonal trust and the role of interpersonal trust on employee-based brand equity were also significant in the current study. These results indicated that servant leadership not only influences the overall performance of their organizations, but can also influence the employees in such a way that a deficit of trust is controlled by them among employees which leads to better performance, and this performance translates into the development of employee-based brand equity.

Servant leadership is a schematic management approach to encourage the employees involved in various domains (e.g., interpersonal, moral, psychological, and intellectual) and promote the full potential of employees (Jones, 2018). Some of the previous scholars also evaluated such relationships between servant leadership and interpersonal trust in employees and got similar kinds of results (Politis and Politis, 2017). The indirect effects of interpersonal trust as a mediator between servant leadership and employee-based brand equity showed a significant association, indicating that trust among employees is a helping tool in such relationships. Once the employees develop trust among themselves, a sense of rivalry is eliminated from their minds, and this condition helps the business to grow.

A few scholars of the past also evaluated the mediating role of interpersonal trust in different situations and got similar results

(Kim and Park, 2019), which support our model. The moderating role of ethical work climate was also tested in this study, which proved to not regulate these relationships for employee-based brand equity development. This could be due to the reason that servant leadership had a strong influence on employees, which leads to EBBE with a special focus on interpersonal trust among employees. Therefore, the ethical work climate did not regulate these relationships, although some scholars suggested that it could moderate the relationships from various perspectives (Teng et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Empirical findings of this study indicate that servant leadership promotes employee-based brand equity. Thus, servant leadership, a management strategy, can help manage individuals in the workplace at various levels (e.g., social, moral, psychological, and intellectual). Thus, servant leadership directly influences the development of employee-based brand equity and positively impacts EBBE. Moreover, it can also be drawn from the empirical evidence of this study that servant leadership increases interpersonal trust. The reason might be that servant leaders try to promote an individual's attributes, such as excellent moral qualities, general decency, and moral perfection. Thus, developing such characteristics is essential to promote mutual trust, and employees tend to create interpersonal trust. In human relations research, interpersonal trust is critical for successful and long-lasting human partnerships.

Similarly, based on this study, interpersonal trust has the potency to increase employee brand-based equity. Because trust is an essential element of a social exchange relationship (Boateng et al., 2019), the higher the social exchange connection between the two parties, the greater the degree of trust regarded by both parties (Greenberg and Dillman, 2021). Thus, interpersonal trust promotes employee-based brand equity. However, the moderating role of ethical work climate has not been proved in this study in promoting interpersonal trust through servant leadership. Thus, it can be concluded that organizations should try to promote a culture of servant leadership to create an environment that would nurture interpersonal trust and employee brand-based equity.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical perspective, this study touched on the line of employee-based brand equity through servant leadership and interpersonal trust. First, this study tends to add to the existing body of knowledge by investigating the role of servant leadership in promoting employee brand-based equity. This is the first study that has documented the role of servant leadership in developing and shaping employee-based brand equity. Although overwhelming literature regarding servant leadership theory is available in healthcare, hospitality, and education sectors, no prior research has investigated the influence of servant leadership on employee-based brand equity. Second, this study added to the literature about interpersonal trust by quantifying the impact of servant leadership on interpersonal trust. Third, this study investigated the role of ethical work climate in predicting interpersonal trust based on servant leadership. Thus, this study extended the literature on servant leadership by establishing the empirical and theoretical distinction of servant leadership theory.

Moreover, this study increases the coherence in the servant leadership area. Therefore, the current research would fill this gap by assessing the influence of servant leadership on EBBE. The positive anticipation that everyone will add to one's general wellbeing without inflicting harm is referred to as interpersonal trust. From a practical point of view, this study posits that organizations should focus on promoting servant leadership to increase employee brand-based equity. Moreover, it will also increase interpersonal trust because interpersonal trust is an essential component of successful and sustainable human relationships in the workplace. Moreover, promoting interpersonal trust in the workplace can foster positive behaviors and increase organizational learning. The development of trust in the workplace can shape more positive behaviors, such as engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has some limitations too. For instance, the first limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature. Thus, conducting longitudinal research on these variables can provide important insights in the future. Second, increasing the sample size in the future would also be an important area of research. Third, this study used only one mediator, and other potential mediators can also be used to investigate the impact of servant leadership in the future, in addition the helping behaviors in the shape of organizational citizenship behavior (individual and organizational) can also be a mediating variable. Moreover, the role of ethical work climate has not been proved in this study, and hence considering other moderating variables would provide deeper insights in the future. In this regard, Islamic work ethics can also be considered as a moderating variable. Similarly, organizational culture can also be a potential moderator in this regard.

Other leadership styles, such as transformational/transactional and paternalistic leadership styles, can also be a predictor variable in future studies. Similarly, employee-based brand equity can be tested in the shape of its dimensions in future studies covering the dimension of brand allegiance, brand consistent behavior, and brand endorsement. Investigating the impact of servant leadership on brand allegiance, brand endorsement, and brand-consistent behavior would be an interesting area for future research. This study considered only banking sector employees while including other service sectors such as hospitality and retail service sectors would provide important insights. Similarly, adding other sectors

into future studies might provide deeper insights. In future studies, researchers can compare employee-based brand equity in different organizations.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Zhengzhou University of Light Industry, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SZ conceived and designed the concept and wrote the manuscript. SG collected the data. Both authors read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Role of Communication Strategies in Organizational Commitment, Mediating Role of Faculty Engagement: Evidence From English Language Teachers

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Employees are critical stakeholders for an organization because they directly deal with the end-users and represent the entire firm. To recognize the strategic importance of the employees, organizations create communication programs to keep employees apprised of organizational issues. In this regard, this study examined the role of communication strategies (i.e., information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback) on organizational commitment. The study also investigated the mediating effect of faculty engagement between communication strategies and organizational commitment. Self-administered survey aided in acquiring data from 276 English language teachers in China. The analysis of the data was conducted using SmartPLS through the Structured Equation Modeling technique. The outcome of the study demonstrated that information flow and information feedback significantly impact organizational commitment and faculty engagement. The analysis also revealed that information adequacy significantly impacts organizational commitment but has no relationship with faculty engagement. The mediation analysis demonstrated that faculty engagement mediated the relationship between information flow and organizational commitment and between information feedback and organization commitment. However, faculty engagement did not mediate the relationship between information adequacy and organizational commitment among English language teachers in China. In theoretical terms, the study contributed in terms of incorporating different communication strategies and examining their effect on organizational commitment and faculty engagement. In practical terms, this study would be beneficial for the management of the educational institutes to develop different ways of enhancing communication strategies within the institute. This study also provided directions for the future, for example, conducting the study on other subject teachers, increasing the sample, carrying out the research in a different context, and adding different mediators and moderators in the existing model.

Keywords: information flow, information adequacy, information feedback, faculty engagement, organizational commitment

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INTRODUCTION

Faculty members have several important obligations toward their organizations. They are important stakeholders of organizations due to their professional positions and capacity to impact outsiders (Kim and Rhee, 2011). Further, they noticed that educational institutions now realize the strategic importance of teachers for enhancing the performance of the institution. Therefore, these organizations develop systematic communication programs to keep them informed about the organizational issues. These communication programs consist of managers, supervisors, administrators, and internal communication teams (Rhee and Moon, 2009). The importance of faculty members is quite similar to employees of any organization. So, when organizations provide effective internal communication to employees about the organizational goals, they are more likely to work hard. Such employees advocate for the organization to everyone else and establish a strong relationship with the organization (Mishra et al., 2014).

Faculty members are the most valuable asset of an institution because they have an important role in maintaining sustainability. Their functionality is varied across different institutions. Therefore, it becomes difficult to manage their roles appropriately. Some faculty members are more devoted, and they try to deliver more than what is required by their employer organizations. This devotion of faculty members enhances their work engagement which defines the significance of their roles in academic performance. So, why do some faculty members get more involved in the institution's operations? In the literature on organizational behavior and management, "organizational commitment" seems widely used. According to a research, faculty opinions toward their institution significantly impact their commitment (Jing and Zhang, 2014). Organizational commitment is a behavioral disposition that refers to an individual's willingness to remain employed. It motivates the employees to become high performers. It also leads to put up maximum effort in the company's best interests (Lovakov, 2016). According to studies, one of the most important determinants of the additional activities of faculty members is organizational commitment (Lovakov, 2016). Professionals who are prominently committed to the organization consider the work in a more favorable dimension. They desire to stay employed in the company, and are much more satisfied with their work. It is assumed that a committed employee is a good fighter for the organization (Lawrence et al., 2012). There are many factors which help in strengthening the commitment of employees with organization. Effective communication is one of these factors at organizational level.

Professional communication is acknowledged as a subset of organizational communication. It is vital for shaping employee-organization ties (in this case, faculty–organization interactions). It is also important for boosting workplace productivity (Men, 2014). The relationship development initiatives at organizational level such as communication efforts may result in two critical outcomes. These include job engagement and organizational commitment (Mishra et al., 2014). Employee engagement (faculty engagement in this study) is better described as a pleasant and rewarding state of mind which relates to commitment, vitality, and immersion at work (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Such engagement is all about getting involved in work at hand and feeling energized by it. Based on trust and fulfillment criteria, commitment is one of the most commonly cited factors of faculty–organization relationship quality in public relations (Men, 2014). A research implies that engagement's role in faculty–organization relationships is understudied (Saks, 2019). This is a shortcoming, because job engagement has been shown to be a determinant of long-term organizational commitment in studies (Saks, 2019). It is also critical to study faculty engagement to comprehend that what may drive organizational commitment in educational institutions (Harrison et al., 2017).

Human capital having lots of energy, effectiveness, and commitment are required to achieve competitive edge in the modern world. Several organizations are well aware that engagement and commitment are crucial to their competitiveness. Faculty members also have the responsibility to keep their organizations competitive. So, they are anticipated to have high levels of professional motivation, dedication, and job engagement. Disengaged teachers are upset and unsatisfied with their employment. Therefore, they underperform and have an adverse influence on their coworkers' efforts in the organizations. On the contrary, engaged faculty members are wholly devoted, committed, and determined to their work. An engaged staff can boost an organization's competitive advantage (Harrison et al., 2017). Effective communication is one of the important tasks of all academic, profit, and non-profit organizations. A growing body of research on higher education institutions have found that communication is critical for molding work attitudes and organizational productivity. It strengthens an organization's vision, activities, and procedures. It also helps in accelerating organizational improvements (Keyton, 2017). Communication is dependent on the possibilities of interaction and relationship development. It provides stimulation for professional and personal relationships through a variety of organizational communication methods (Murphy, 2015). During the recent years, it is observed that much attention has been paid to the enthusiasm and prestige of teachers in educational institutions. On the other hand, communication attribute has been neglected. Therefore, consideration to communication is critical for higher education, both in terms of success and efficacy (Avotra et al., 2021; Yingfei et al., 2021).

Communication at the organizational level is the process by which people share information relevant to the organization strategy, activities, and processes (Samson, 2018). Lateral communication refers to communication of data at the same level. Vertical communication refers to distribution of information either upward or downward between different positions in the organization. Both types of communications are accomplished through official or unstructured communication channels. It is important to provide a platform of communication to employees and supervisors for maintaining organizational activities. It may help in effective communication between the workers operating in different departments at various levels (Hee et al., 2019). According to a researcher, communication has two components at organizational level. The first is the content or the

information which is communicated. The flow of information or "how information is shared inside an organization" is the other factor to consider. The flow of communication is a facet of the broader notion of psychological climate. It refers to an employee's interpretations of communication at work (Smidts et al., 2001, p. 1059). To measure communication content in organizational communication, the categories such as access to information, information adequacy, company information, and feedback are developed (Downs and Hazen, 1977; Goldhaber and Krivonos, 1977).

The demand for interaction, confidence in seniors, and communication linkages described by Roberts and O'Reilly (1974) are concerned with how information is shared in organizations. According to Hargie (2009), the function of internal communications is shifting through one to two-way communications. One-way communication is largely concerned with regulating employee conduct to assure adherence to work. It is also associated with dissemination of the previously decided choices without participation of workers. Two-way conversation at organizational level is defined as workers' participation and involvement in decision making practice. According to Hargie (2009), one-way communication indicates an asymmetrical point of view, while two-way communication reflects a harmonious viewpoint. To summarize different levels of communication strategies, several people place a strong emphasis on the informational side of organizational communication. Some place an emphasis on the environment when it comes to workplace communication. Internal communication tactics may reflect different organizational viewpoints. In terms of communication strategies for teaching English language by the faculty, authors divided these in three elements. These strategies include information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback. Previously, role of information flow and information adequacy have been explored in general perspective of organizational commitment (Walden et al., 2017). Researchers did not explore the impact of these communication strategies along with the feedback of information on faculty engagement and organizational commitment.

To fill this gap, authors tried to explore the impact of information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback suggested by Walden et al. (2017) on faculty engagement leading to the organizational commitment in educational institutions of English teaching. This study is based on certain questions such as what are the possible relationships between information flow, adequacy, and feedback with organizational commitment of faculty members. This study also tries to find out the mediating role of faculty engagement between these relationships instead of job or work engagement of the employees of the organizations as suggested by Walden et al. (2017). The results of this study give directions regarding internal communication strategies and their role in achieving organizational commitment of faculty members.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study is inspired by relationship management theory by Ledingham (2003) and the public relations literature on faculty–organizational relationships. Cultural and societal roots, relationship development tactics, communications, and outcomes of interactions make up the relationships (Men, 2014). The relationships, hence developed, are the changeable outcomes of interactions between an organization and the various organizational and the outside groups (Ledingham, 2003). This seems to be true for different users and faculty–organization relationships administration, in which the organization increasingly builds and strives to keep connections with the faculty throughout the times. The conventional notion of integration of employees within organizations is related to this relationship viewpoint (Zerfass et al., 2018). The faculty relationships are more likely to be open, trusting, and credible when educational institutions implement faculty-centered communication tactics and develop an internal climate based on collaboration with instructors and staff (Zerfass et al., 2018). According to research, the quality of the faculty–organization relationship is related to the efforts of organizations to create ties with teachers and employees. The faculty perspectives on the quality of the faculty–organization connection are favorably predicted by the integration of faculty members in the organization. Furthermore, the faculty perceptions of the faculty–organization interaction are favorably associated with transformational leadership style (Men, 2014).

Information flow, interaction cooperativeness, and information adequacy are investigated as the components of internal communication and predictor variables of relationship management effects in this study. Interaction cooperativeness considers faculty getting about the content of communication on individual and organizational issues, while information adequacy considers faculty views about the content of communication on individual and organizational issues. Investigating faculty engagement as a prospective relationship result is one strategy to enhance relationship management theory in the context of faculty–organization connections (Walden et al., 2017). Faculty engagement ought to be a logical byproduct of strategic communication, according to Ruck and Welch's (2012) evaluations of the literature. Although the current empirical studies on the engagement framework consider that engagement has yet to be incorporated into the faculty–organization relationship paradigm (Mishra et al., 2014). Authors introduce faculty engagement as a particular type of engagement in the current framework to progress this theory. The relationship management theory has also previously provided basis for the relationships among employees through communication strategies Walden et al. (2017) which suggested that it could also be utilized as a foundational stone in our research. This study tries to find possible impact of communication strategies among faculty members to achieve organizational commitment.

This study also got a support from the theories of organizational commitment including behavioral commitment theory, transactional commitment theory, obligatory commitment theory, and attitudinal commitment theory (Becker, 1960). Theories that use an attitudinal concept of commitment emphasize on an individual's desire to stay in an organization. According to this hypothesis, an individual's commitment to an organization was likely influenced by emotions of cohesion or connection with that group (Meyer, 1984). With the help of this theory, it is assumed that faculty

engagement is a behavioral aspect which may lead to their commitment with the organization. Therefore, this theory provides a foundational basis of organizational commitment by the faculty members.

Communication Strategies and Faculty Engagement

According to the analysis of the literature, the level of employee engagement (faculty engagement in this case) first gained traction as a topic of substantial scientific investigation with Kahn's (1990) research. Kahn's (1990) research characterized engagement as the presentation of someone's identity *via* job behaviors which encourage commitment to work. Work engagement, on the other hand, has been the topic of discussion since Kahn (1990) stated this definition as to what it genuinely comprises. The argument includes whether work engagement differs from other ideas such as organizational satisfaction and commitment, and what exactly employees are involved with at work. "Being dedicated to an organization is different than being engaged to the activities done within it", it is also wise to note (Vecina et al., 2013, p. 293). According to studies, there is a difference between work engagement (the subject of this study) with organizational engagement, that is, a type of organizational commitment. To distinguish the concept of job engagement from that of organizational commitment, authors employ the label job engagement of faculty in this study. Job engagement entails a task orientation as well as one's work position. Job engagement is a psychological condition which workers perceive (similar to flow and also being taken away for work), so it describes whether people engage with their employment or not (Saks, 2019). Organizational commitment, on the other hand, is an emotional tie to the organization that includes cost concerns and a social obligation to the organization (Meyer, 1984).

A prospective study has demonstrated that more engaged and determined people with their occupations have the probability to keep ties with their employers for long. It demonstrates strong organizational commitment (Lesener et al., 2019). However, there are some similarities between work engagement and organizational commitment, they are not the same. Faculty members' job engagement is defined as their engagement with activities, passion for jobs, and ability to work effectively. Engagement is made up of some of the following elements: Vigor, commitment, and assimilation. At job, vigor entails a high degree of energy and mental fortitude, a determination to put effort into one's task, and perseverance in the face of adversity (Schaufeli et al., 2006). The feeling of importance, passion, motivation, dignity, and struggle are all characteristics of commitment. When somebody is entirely attentive and pleasantly immersed in their task, assimilation happens, and time passes swiftly (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Engagement is a psychological condition which lasts longer and therefore is separate from many other conceptions such as organizational commitment (Saks, 2019). Work engagement is defined in this study as a condition of absorption in working in which faculty members show passion for accomplishing a specialized job while retaining a strong emotional attachment to their job position.

When faculty members obtain resources and support from their organization, some of them feel obligated to reciprocate it by immersing themselves deeper wholeheartedly in their roles (Saks, 2019). Faculty members can absorb themselves into the day-to-day activities and experience a sense of belongingness with this support. When faculty members believe their organization and supervisors support them, they experience work and job-related engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006). According to Ruck and Welch (2012), organizations must meet the following six requirements to engender the behaviors associated with engagement: simply stating the employee's role in an organization, assisting the employee in identifying with the organization, making sure workers feel that they have organizational support, providing information that assists employees in understanding corporate goals and strategy.

Educational organizations should evaluate information flow, adequacy of the information, feedback of the information, and interactive support as characters of communication which are likely to lead to work engagement when interacting with staff and faculty members. Such factors measure how faculty members perceive the access of work and relevant information about the organization, and they handle the common layers of communication inside organizations (organization to faculty and manager to faculty) (Rhee and Moon, 2009). The open interchange of ideas, topics, and views through an organization's vertical and horizontal networks is referred to as information flow. Employees' perceptions of information adequacy are defined as their belief that they are obtaining the quantity of knowledge needed to execute their tasks in the short term and make long-term decisions regarding their employment (Robertson, 2005; Rawlins, 2008). The organizational environment and mechanism of relaying information to employees are the focus of information flow and information adequacy, whereas the content of communication in organizations is the focus of information feedback (Robertson, 2005; Rhee and Moon, 2009). Faculty members and students in educational institutions frequently seek feedback from colleagues and mentorship. Having these points considered, it appears that faculty members may agree with Robertson's (2005) and Rawlins's (2008) notions about information flow within organizations, assuming that organizations should allow the open interchange of information and ideas at work. When faculty encounters high-quality information flow at work, it is expected that they will show evidence of engagement. So, this study proposed the hypothesis about this kind of possible relationship:

H_1: *Information flow plays a role in faculty engagement.*

Furthermore, informational adequacy involves giving faculty members with an appropriate amount of communication on important issues so that they would perform successfully at workplace. Smidts et al. (2001) shared similar viewpoint, claiming that organizational communication among employees consisted of delivering information well about organization and the employee individually. Performing one's everyday work as a faculty member necessitates frequent updates from bosses on personal and individual difficulties (Hartman and McCambridge, 2011). As a result, faculty members' inclination for effective communication shows a need to obtain constant updates on

the organization's achievements, objectives, as well as how their specific function is evaluated by the organization. It appears like faculty members who work for organizations that have a lot of knowledge should be more engaged. Similarly, feedback of information would also keep the faculty members engaged to their tasks so the following hypotheses were proposed:

H_3: information adequacy plays a role in faculty engagement.

H_5: information feedback plays a role in student engagement.

In conclusion, flow of information, adequacy of the information, and information feedback are the three levels of communication that are often discussed inside organizations, because they represent the substance and organizational strategy of employee communication. Authors expect faculty members to be involved with the work if they believe that their organization is backing them and engaging with them. Therefore, this communication must be very pertinent to them.

Communication Strategies, Engagement, and Organizational Commitment

Faculty engagement, as previously said, is a psychological condition in which faculty members are fully immersed in their work responsibilities and role performance at the workplace. Organizational commitment contrasts with work engagement in that it refers to a person's mindset and attachment to their company, whereas employee engagement focuses on work absorption. Organizations must encourage as well as provide knowledge assets to employees regarding job engagement. It helps them to emerge above the other faculty members (Saks, 2019). In this setting, faculty engagement is the result of an organization's efforts to foster beneficial relationships with its employees.

Furthermore, studies on faculty–organization interactions indicates that providing particular information about faculty status within the organization as well as specific task feedback might improve connections (Karanges et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019). Organizations' relationship development efforts, in particular, produce a significant amount of commitment. The amount to which other party thinks the interaction is worth investing time and effort to preserve and promote, could be characterized as organizational commitment (Kim et al., 2019). Commitment, in the viewpoint of the faculty, is a long-term desire to stay connected to the company as well as a pleasant feelings disposition toward their workplace. Staff employees receiving assistance from their employer are obliged to put everything into their employment, which causes them to feel more devoted to the company. An urge to continue one's affiliation with an organization is influenced by his work experiences. So, commitment emerges as a result of workplace experiences that are aligned with staff values and meet staff's needs (Albdour and Ikhlas, 2014). Scholars should pay attention to the link between workplace contact with faculty members and organizational commitment. Faculty members frequently request assistance from their superiors and desire unrestricted accessibility to information about their organization's future. According to industry research, educational institution teachers have become less burdened and more likely to desire career security than other professions (Singh and Maini, 2021).

Employees' commitment to their organization is strengthened by open communication, which reduces the possibility that they may explore for other employment prospects beyond their organization (Sadia et al., 2016). This is especially essential for young faculty members. Organizations are significant contributors in improving how individuals of this faculty view their connection with their employers by satisfying the communication demands of young faculty. Work- and job-centered faculty engagement promotes organizational commitment between both academics and staff, according to research (Xie and Derakhshan, 2021). Tomietto et al. (2019) model of job engagement also said that communications and assistance have an impact on employee engagement. Given their workplace communication choices, these challenges of job engagement appear to be particularly pertinent to young faculty. All these arguments suggested the following hypothesis.

H_2: Information flow plays a role in organizational commitment.

H_4: Information adequacy plays a role in organizational commitment.

H_6: Information feedback plays a role in organizational commitment.

H_7: Faculty engagement plays a role in organizational commitment.

Mediating Role of Faculty Engagement

Humanistic approach emphasizes a person's quantifiable, dynamic working, predictable qualities, and emotional capability, rather than workplace negatives such as exhaustion, disagreement, and job discontent. As a result, educational institutions are now looking for faculty who are energetic, dedicated, and focused, i.e., persons who are enthusiastic and engaged with their profession because such faculty members are more efficient and imaginative when they devote their skills and experience to the organization (Minghui et al., 2018). The term "faculty engagement" refers to a pleasant and rewarding emotional state regarding work that is characterized by enthusiasm, determination, and absorption. According to a previous study, the most important aspects of faculty engagement are commitment and vigor (Taris et al., 2017).

Faculty members in educational institutions with greater levels of vigor and passion discover a variety of approaches to address working requirements and barriers while maintaining health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the immersion component, that relates to entire focus on a task, is commonly described by the progression of time or even the trouble of disconnecting himself from someone's activity (Ojo et al., 2021). According to Burić and Macuka (2018), vigor relates to the tangible strength of the mind or body while working; dedication refers to the doer's emotional state, in which he or she is enthusiastic about work; and absorption refers to a cognitive situation in which the individual is completely absorbed in a task.

The pleasant and fascinating inspiration which teachers demonstrate in accomplishing their performance targets while feeling totally engaged and committed in performing their job

obligations are crucial qualities to clarify job engagement (Wood et al., 2020). Since a prior study demonstrated statistically meaningful and favorable correlations between teacher work engagement and student achievement, teachers' job engagement can be considered crucial in terms of overall school success. Teacher engagement, according to scholars, is one of the indicators of student engagement (Keay, 2018; Butakor et al., 2021). Teachers that are engaged go above and beyond their formal tasks and duties to support their students intellectually using a variety of ways and strategies, resulting in improved academic achievement (Sugianingrat et al., 2019). Hence, the significant role of faculty engagement and the literature discussed in the previous sections, suggested the following role of faculty engagement. **Figure 1** shows the bonding of the previous literature and the study module of hypothesis framework.

H_8: Faculty engagement mediates the relationship of information flow and organizational commitment.

H_9: Faculty engagement mediates the relationship of information adequacy and organizational commitment.

H_{10}: Faculty engagement mediates the relationship of information feedback and organizational commitment.

METHODOLOGY

The hypotheses of the study were developed to analyze the impact of information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback on organizational commitment with the mediation of faculty engagement. The study used a deductive approach and a quantitative research design to test the hypotheses of the study (Nawaz et al., 2022). The hypotheses helped the researcher to investigate the impact of independent variables on dependent variables. The reliability of the study was ensured using a quantitative research design because this design helps to reduce the biases in the study. The questionnaire survey was clear and precise to ensure data rationality. The target population of this study was English language teachers in China. The sample from the entire population was chalked out using the non-probability purposive sampling method. This method saves the resources as the data is collected from readily available respondents (Xiaolong et al., 2021). This particular sector (English language faculty) has been chosen purposefully because it better complements the conceptual model of the study adhering communication strategies with faculty engagement and organizational commitment (Kim and Rhee, 2011). The questionnaires were in English language; therefore, the English language faculty easily and properly understood the questionnaire. A careful estimation of the sample was made based on the study conducted by Wolf et al. (2013) who has investigated the parameter estimate biases in detail along with the scenarios where the parameters affect the statistical power, with a thorough statistical analysis. Wolf et al. (2013) found that a sample size between 30 and 460 cases is found to produce meaningful trends and patterns among the parameters using structural equation modeling. Self-administered survey aided in the data collection process. A total of 350 questionnaires were disbursed among the participants. The respondents were given enough time to fill out the questionnaire. The respondents were told to be natural while filling out the questionnaire and there are no right or wrong responses. A total of 300 questionnaires were collected from the

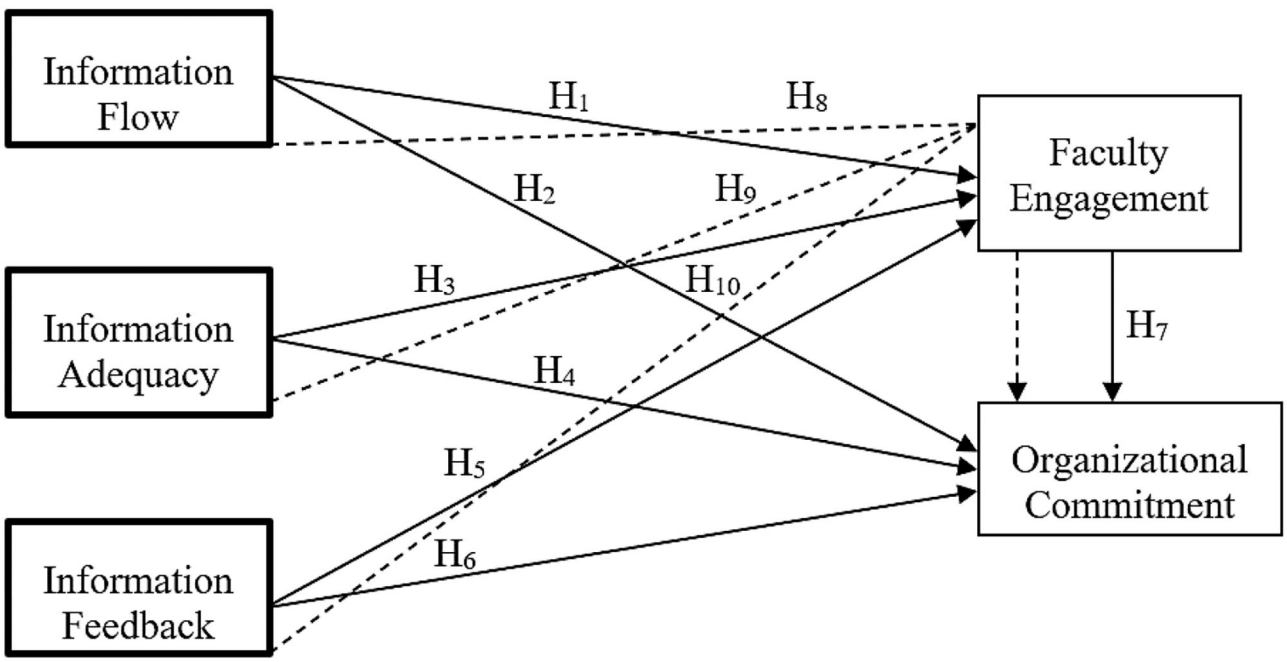

FIGURE 1 | Theoretical framework.

participants over a period of 2 weeks. A total of 24 responses were discarded during the data screening process as they were incomplete or not properly filled by the respondents. A total of 276 responses were found usable after the initial screening for the survey. The usable response rate was 78%. Statistical software was then used for analyzing the data that was obtained from the study participants. The unit of analysis is individuals as the data has been taken from the English language faculty of China.

Statistical Tool

SmartPLS 3.3.3 software was used as it aids in examine the Structured Equation Modeling (SEM) technique. It is considered as a suitable statistical technique for the analyses based on perceptions (i.e., hypotheses testing). The SEM is an equally helpful technique for all research models irrespective of their nature, i.e., univariate, bivariate, or multivariate. According to Hair et al. (2017), it can be used for both theory exploration and theory confirmation. The partial least square structural equation modeling offers two major advanced regarding data. First of all, traditional multivariate technique requires normal distribution of data, while PLS–SEM is very robust for model estimations and shows flexibility regarding normal distribution, kurtosis and skewness. Second, this technique is also helpful regarding the analysis of ordinal scales along with interval ad ratio scales. This software helps in analyzing the data in a short time with the help of path models such as measurement model and structural model (Nawaz et al., 2020). The recent study has used SmartPLS software for analyzing the data since it is very user friendly and generates detailed results. These models help to determine data reliability, data validity, and significance of the relationships between the constructs. On the basis of *t*-values and *p*-values, the hypotheses are either rejected or accepted.

Measurement

The data from the study participants were acquired using a 5-point Likert scale. The measurement scales for every construct have been described in detail. The full questionnaire is given in **Appendix A**.

Information Flow

There were four items in the measurement scale of information flow and it was adopted from Rhee and Moon (2009). The sample items are such as "Information in our organization flows openly from the top of the organization downwards." The Cronbach alpha obtained for this scale is 0.884.

Information Adequacy

The measurement scale of information adequacy was adopted from Rhee and Moon (2009) and it consisted of nine items. The sample items are such as "Employees like me receive adequate information how we are being judged from the organization." The Cronbach alpha obtained for this scale is 0.941.

Information Feedback

There were five items on the scale of information feedback and it was adopted from Rosen et al. (2006). The sample items are such as "My supervisor is usually available when I want performance information." The Cronbach alpha obtained for this scale is 0.922.

Faculty Engagement

The measurement scale of faculty engagement was adopted from Schaufeli et al. (2006) and it consisted of nine items. The sample items are such as "At my work, I feel bursting with energy." The Cronbach alpha obtained for this scale is 0.906.

Organizational Commitment

There were five items on the scale of organizational commitment and it was adopted from Gallicano et al. (2012). The sample items are such as "I have a long-lasting bond with the organization I work for." The Cronbach alpha obtained for this scale is 0.917.

Demographic Profile

Table 1 below shows the demographic characteristics of the study participants. The table depicts that 57.97% of males and 42.0% of females participated in the study. Moreover, 19.57% of the respondents had an age between 20 and 30 years, 55.47% of the respondents had an age between 31 and 40 years, 16.30% of the respondents had an age between 41 and 50 years, and 14.49% of the respondents had an age above 50 years. The participants had either a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, or a Ph.D., or other degree. A total of 15.58% of the faculty members had a bachelor's degree, 52.27% of the English faculty teacher had a master's degree, while 32.48% had a Ph.D. or other degree. The English faculty teachers who had an experience of <1 year were 18.25%, the English faculty teachers who had an experience of between 1 and 3 years were 43.48%, the English faculty teachers who had an experience of between 4 and 6 years were 27.90%, whereas the English faculty teachers who had an experience of more than 6 years were 10.51%.

TABLE 1 | Demographics analysis ($N = 276$).

Demographics	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	160	57.97
Female	116	42.03
Age (years)		
20–30	54	19.57
31–40	137	55.47
41–50	45	16.30
Above 50	40	14.49
Education		
Bachelors	43	15.58
Masters	144	52.17
Ph.D. and others	89	32.48
Experience (years)		
<1	50	18.25
1–3	120	43.48
4–6	77	27.90
More than 6	29	10.51

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Measurement Model

Figure 2 depicts the outer measurement model. The output of the measurement model assists in explaining the contribution of independent variables to outcome variables.

Table 2 demonstrates the model assessment of the direct model. The value of factor loading of more than 0.60 is considered acceptable (Bollen, 2019). The result of the factor loadings for this study shows that the values are above the threshold level; thus, the values are acceptable. The VIF indicator helps in addressing the issue of collinearity. The value of variance inflation factors should be below 5 (Salmerón et al., 2018), and the results revealed that all the values are between 1.657 and 4.938; therefore, the issue of multicollinearity was not detected from the data.

Table 2 also shows the results for construct reliability and validity. According to Taber (2018), for determining the internal consistency the value of Cronbach alpha (α) has to be above 0.70. The table shows that the values are above 0.70. For information flow, the value is (α = 0.884); for information adequacy, the value is (α = 0.941); for information feedback, the value is (α = 0.922); for faculty engagement, the value is (α = *0.906*); and for organizational commitment the value is (α = 0.917); thus, internal consistency exists. Moreover (Benitez et al., 2020), explained that the value of composite reliability must be >0.70 for the data to be reliable. The value obtained for the composite reliability is between 0.920 and 0.950 which indicates that the data came out to be reliable. Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) highlights the presence of convergent validity in the data set. This value must be more than 0.50 (Shrestha, 2021). The value obtained for AVE is between 0.566 and 0.762 which indicates the existence of convergent validity.

The results for Fornell–Larker Criterion and Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio have been shown in **Table 3**. These tests explain the discriminant validity of the data. As for the Fornell–Larkar criterion, the value at the top column should be higher than the following values on the same column (Nawaz et al., 2019). For example, for faculty engagement, the first value in the column is 0.752, while the following values are 0.476, 0.533, 0.564, and 0.588, which are <0.752. For the HTMT ratio, the threshold is below 0.90 (Benitez et al., 2020). The results for both these tests are under acceptable ranges; thus, it shows that discriminant validity exists.

The R^2-value explains the sustainability of the model and its value should be near 0.50 (Akossou and Palm, 2013). The values of R^2 obtained for faculty engagement and organizational commitment are 0.360 and 0.495, respectively. The values are close to 0.50; therefore, the model shows sustainability. The

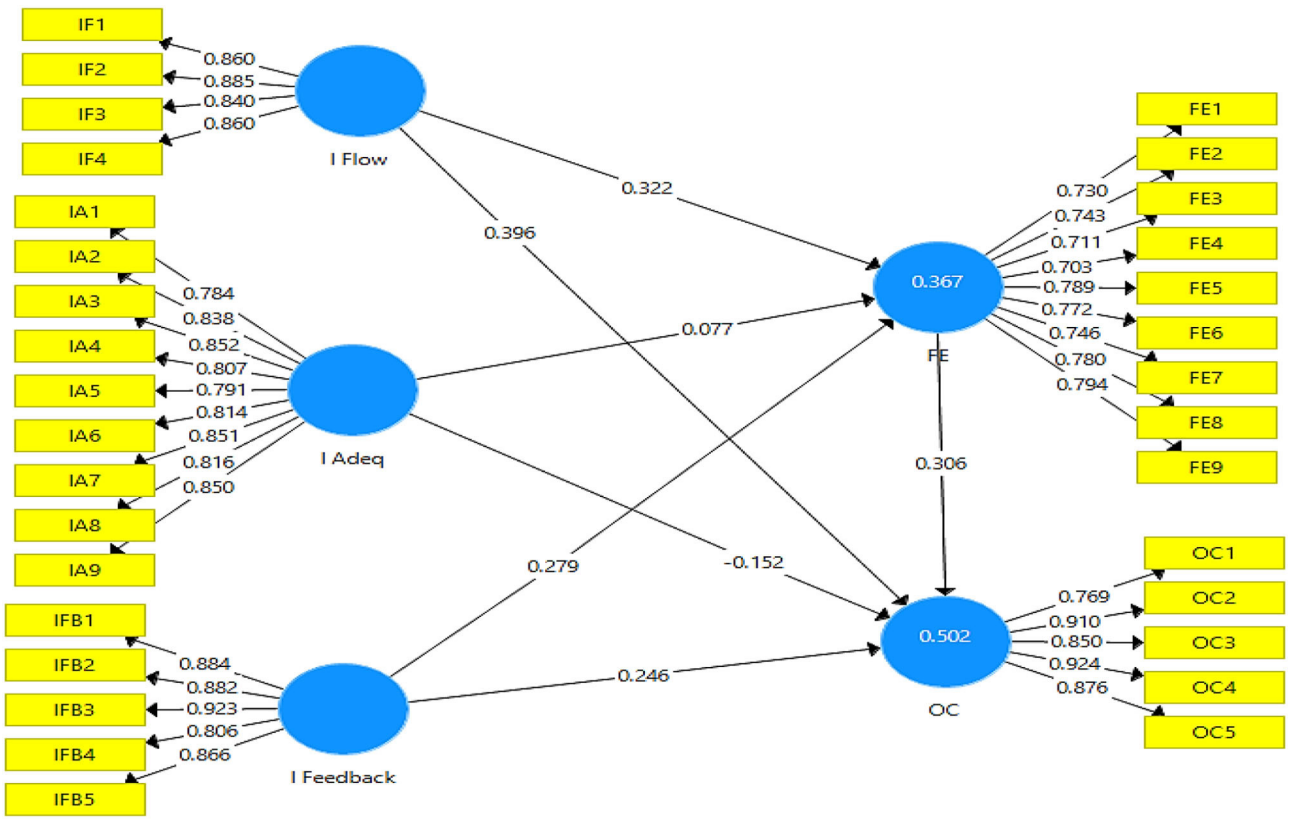

FIGURE 2 | Output of measurement model. IFlow, Information flow; IAdeq, Information adequacy; IFeedback, Information feedback; FE, Faculty engagement; OC, Organizational commitment.

TABLE 2 | Model assessment (direct model).

		Factor loadings	VIF	Construct reliability and validity		
				α	Composite reliability	AVE
	IF1	0.860	2.263			
Information flow	IF2	0.885	2.493	0.884	0.920	0.742
	IF3	0.840	2.110			
	IF4	0.860	2.296			
	IA1	0.784	3.008			
Information adequacy	IA2	0.838	4.030			
	IA3	0.852	4.092			
	IA4	0.807	4.298	0.941	0.946	0.677
	IA5	0.791	2.403			
	IA6	0.814	3.219			
	IA7	0.851	4.868			
	IA8	0.816	4.938			
	IA9	0.850	5.181			
	IFB1	0.884	3.851			
	IFB2	0.882	3.500			
Information feedback	IFB3	0.923	3.310	0.922	0.941	0.762
	IFB4	0.806	2.592			
	IFB5	0.866	2.899			
	FE1	0.730	1.865			
Faculty engagement	FE2	0.743	2.596			
	FE3	0.711	2.253			
	FE4	0.703	1.657			
	FE5	0.789	3.341	0.906	0.921	0.566
	FE6	0.772	3.378			
	FE7	0.746	2.795			
	FE8	0.780	4.670			
	FE9	0.794	3.224			
	OC1	0.769	1.665			
Organizational commitment	OC2	0.910	4.082			
	OC3	0.850	2.622	0.917	0.938	0.753
	OC4	0.924	4.888			
	OC5	0.876	3.277			

IF, Information flow; IA, Information adequacy; IFB, Information feedback; FE, Faculty engagement; OC, Organizational commitment; VIF, Variance inflation factor; α, Cronbach alpha; AVE, Average variance extracted.

model with values below 5 is said to be free from collinearity (Legate et al., 2021). The table demonstrates that the values are between 1.580 and 3.050; thus, there was no issue of collinearity.

Structural Model

Figure 3 presents the output of structural model bootstrapping. This shows the values of t-statistics. The PLS–SEM bootstrapping technique used a 95% confidence interval to accept or reject the proposed hypotheses of this study.

Tables 4, **5** reveal the direct effect and indirect effects of the study. The hypotheses were accepted or rejected on the basis of p-values and t-statistics. According to Winship and Zhuo (2020), the t-statistics have to be more than 1.96. Likewise, the threshold for p-value is <0.50 (95% confidence interval) (Ioannidis, 2018). These tables also present the f-values (effect size) that explain the strength of the model. The f-values that are close to 1 indicate a strong effect while the values near to 0 signify a weak effect (Funder and Ozer, 2019).

Table 4 demonstrates the results for Hypotheses H1–H7, i.e., direct effects of the variables. Hypothesis H1 proposed that information flow plays a role in faculty engagement. The results showed that the acceptance of Hypothesis H1 as ($t = 3.276$; $p = 0.000$). The value of effect size ($f^2 = 0.057$) indicates the model is weak. Hypothesis H2 proposed that information flow plays a role in organizational commitment. The results showed that the acceptance of Hypothesis H2 as ($t = 6.091$; $p = 0.001$). The value of effect size ($f^2 = 0.103$) indicates the model is weak. Hypothesis H3 proposed that information adequacy plays a role in faculty engagement. The results showed that the rejection of Hypothesis H3 as ($t = 1.128$; $p = 0.260$). The value of effect size ($f^2 = 0.004$) indicates the model is very weak. Hypothesis H4 proposed that information adequacy

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity.

Constructs	FE	IA	IFB	IF	OC
Fornell–Larcker criterion					
FE	0.752				
IA	0.476	0.823			
IFB	0.533	0.554	0.873		
IF	0.564	0.756	0.656	0.861	
OC	0.588	0.429	0.585	0.615	0.868
Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio					
FE					
IA	0.475				
IFB	0.554	0.589			
IF	0.593	0.819	0.727		
OC	0.621	0.441	0.629	0.677	

N = 276, IF, Information flow; IA, Information adequacy; IFB, Information feedback; FE, Faculty engagement; OC, Organizational commitment.

plays a role in organizational commitment. The results showed that the acceptance of H4 as ($t = 2.492$; $p = 0.000$). The value of effect size ($f^2 = 0.020$) indicates the model is weak. Hypothesis H5 proposed that information feedback plays a role in faculty engagement. The results showed that the acceptance of H5 as ($t = 4.056$; $p = 0.000$). The value of effect size ($f^2 = 0.069$) indicates the model is weak. Hypothesis H6 proposed that information feedback plays a role in organizational commitment. The results showed that the acceptance of H6 as ($t = 3.426$; $p = 0.001$). The value of effect size ($f^2 = 0.064$) indicates the model is weak. Hypothesis H7 proposed that faculty engagement plays a role in organizational commitment. The results showed that the acceptance of H7 as ($t = 4.263$; $p = 0.000$). The value of effect size ($f^2 = 0.119$) indicates the model is weak.

Table 5 presents the results for Hypotheses H8–H10, i.e., the indirect effects of the variables. H8 proposed that faculty engagement mediates the relationship between information flow and organizational commitment. The results showed that the acceptance of Hypothesis H8 as ($t = 2.490$; $p = 0.013$). Hypothesis H9 proposed that faculty engagement mediates the relationship between information adequacy and organizational commitment. The results showed that the rejection of Hypothesis H9 as ($t = 1.058$; $p = 0.291$). Hypothesis H10 proposed that faculty engagement mediates the relationship between information feedback and organizational commitment. The results showed that the acceptance of Hypothesis H10 as ($t = 3.012$; $p = 0.003$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to progress supposition in the field of faculty–organization relationships through analyzing the effect of faculty engagement in these relationships and by gaining a better understanding of how organizations instill committed relationships to faulty members through communication. For this purpose, we created and tested a framework wherein faculty engagement mediated the association between communication strategies and organizational commitment among educational organization's faculty members. The communication strategies included information flow, adequacy of information, and information feedback. The three employee communication variables studied in this study were all drivers of faculty engagement, which was linked to organizational commitment.

This study tried to find out the possible associations between information flow, information adequacy, information feedback, and faculty engagement. This kind of relationships suggested that the teachers, who were communicated properly through the organizational management, were more engaged to their duties. The better the things communicated to the faculty members, better should have been the level of engagement to their jobs. This kind of associations were suggested by some of the scholars of recent past in which the associations of these communication strategies were assessed in terms of job engagement of young generation (Walden et al., 2017). The results showed mixed indications in this study.

The first direct association of information flow with faculty engagement indicated strong association indicating that if information is properly passed on from the administration to the teachers, then it could lead to enhanced dedicated engagement with working by the teachers. The possible reason lies in the flow of information indicating that if information is present but not passed on to the faculty members then it would be difficult for them to do the things on their own. The association of information adequacy with faculty engagement indicated that it was not necessary for the information to be adequate while working of teachers, as there was no significant indication of relationship between both of these. The reason could be drawn from the supposition that the required information for work engagement of teachers does not have any set amount. This information could be of any amount and length as also indicated by Suh et al. (2018).

It was indicated through the results that feedback is very important factor in any communication approach across the organizations (Wang et al., 2020). The results of the association between information feedback and faculty engagement proved that if feedbacks are given properly through communication, then it could lead to more engaged working by the faculty members in educational organizations. The results of all these hypotheses are in accordance with (Walden et al., 2017). They also got the similar results in regard to the millennial generation communication approaches. This study also tried to find out the possible associations of information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback for assessing the organizational commitment of the faculty members. The results indicated a strong positive association between all these three associations.

Similar kind of results were also obtained by Walden et al. (2017) who also found significant associations between communication strategies and the organizational commitment of the employees. The reason behind such results are also alike the reasons for the associations with job engagement of faculty members. The flow of information is necessary, information quantity should be in adequate levels and feedback is also necessary for attaining organizational commitment as were required for the engagement to job. These associations were also

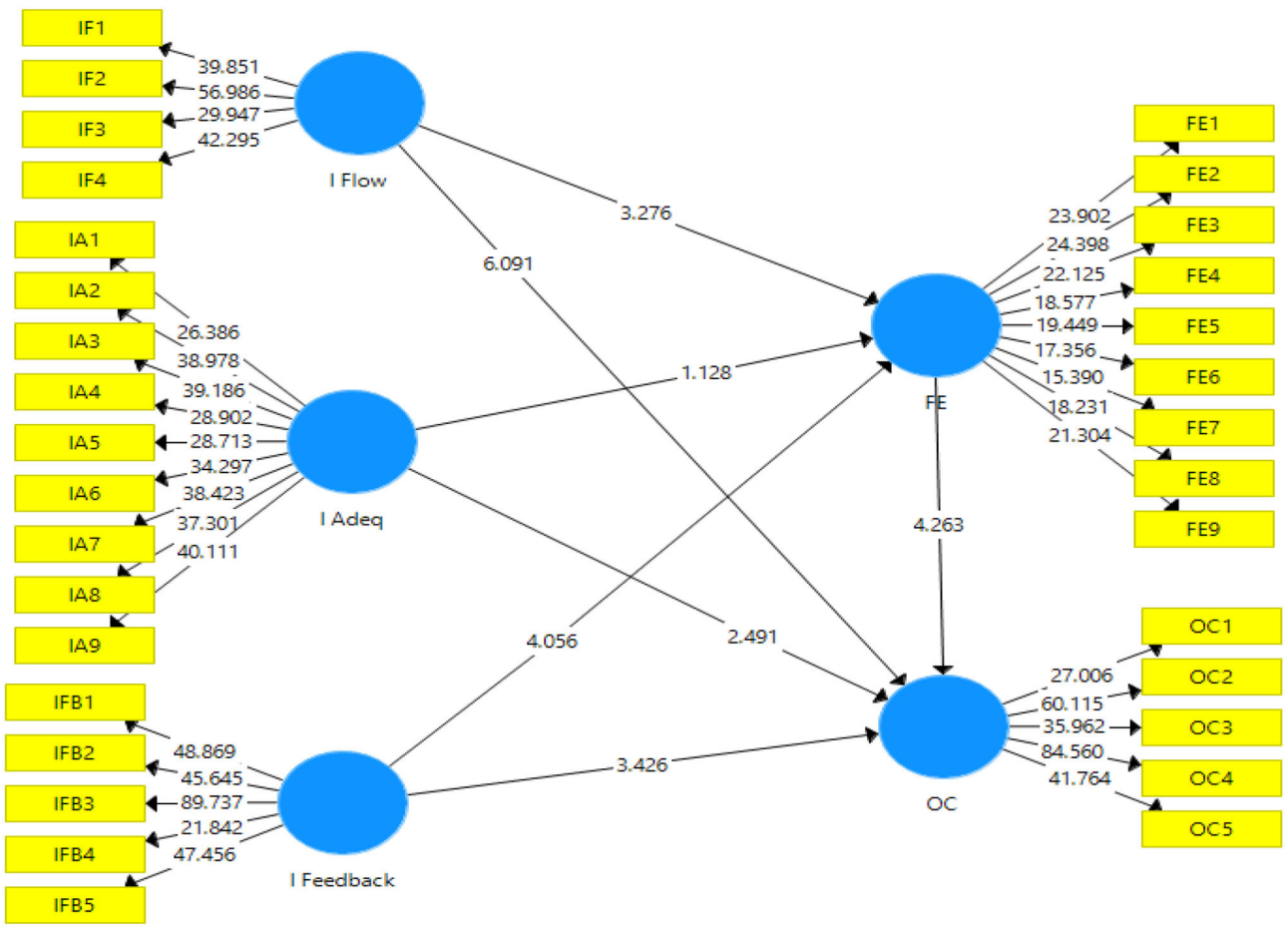

FIGURE 3 | Structural model bootstrapping. IFlow, Information flow; IAdeq, Information adequacy; IFeedback, Information feedback; FE, Faculty engagement; OC, Organizational commitment.

TABLE 4 | Direct effects of the variable.

Paths	H	*O*	*M*	SD	*T*-statistics	Effect size (f^2)	*p*	Results
IF → FE	H_1	0.322	0.315	0.098	3.276	0.057	0.000***	Accepted
IF → OC	H_2	0.396	0.395	0.065	6.091	0.103	0.001***	Accepted
IA → FE	H_3	0.077	0.086	0.069	1.128	0.004	0.260	Rejected
IA → OC	H_4	−0.152	−0.148	0.061	2.491	0.020	0.013*	Accepted
IFB → FE	H_5	0.279	0.282	0.069	4.056	0.069	0.000***	Accepted
IFB → OC	H_6	0.246	0.242	0.072	3.426	0.064	0.001***	Accepted
FE → OC	H_7	0.306	0.306	0.072	4.263	0.119	0.000**	Accepted

*N = 276, ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.005, *p < 0.05.*
H, Hypothesis; O, Original sample; M, Sample mean; SD, Standard deviation; SRMR = 0.092, NFI = 0.688, IF, Information flow; IA, Information adequacy; IFB, Information feedback; FE, Faculty engagement; OC, Organizational commitment.

indicated by some of the previous researchers in the field of organizational management such as Albdour and Ikhlas (2014) and Sadia et al. (2016). The last direct association was assessed between faculty engagement and organizational commitment.

Previously, a lot of research has been carried out in finding the associations between job engagement, work engagement, student engagement, teachers' engagement, and organizational commitment (Xie and Derakhshan, 2021). These associations were also suggested by Tomietto et al. (2019). The results of this study also indicated that more engaged faculty proves more commitment with their organizations. The mediating or indirect associations were also tested in this study indicating that

TABLE 5 | Indirect effects of the variable.

Paths	H	O	*M*	SD	*t*-statistics	*p*	Results
IF → FE → OC	H_8	0.099	0.097	0.040	2.490	0.013*	Accepted
IA → FE → OC	H_9	0.024	0.026	0.022	1.058	0.291	Rejected
IFB → FE → OC	H_{10}	0.085	0.086	0.028	3.012	0.003**	Accepted

*N = 276, **p < 0.005, *p < 0.05.*
H, Hypothesis; O, Original sample; M, Sample mean; SD, Standard deviation; SRMR = 0.092; NFI = 0.688; IF, Information flow; IA, Information adequacy; IFB, Information feedback; FE, Faculty engagement; OC, Organizational commitment.

faculty engagement positively mediated between information flow, information feedback, and organizational commitment. While it could not mediate the relationship between information adequacy and organizational commitment as again the amount of information was not considered necessary component in communication strategies for developing commitment with the organizations. Similar kind of mixed results were also shown by Walden et al. (2017).

Theoretical Implications

This study has some significant theoretical implications. First, the study examined the role of internal strategies of communication (i.e., information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback) on organizational commitment. Such a model has not been investigated and explored before; therefore this study thoroughly added to the existing public relation and education literature. This study also found that among these three communication strategies, two strategies, i.e., information flow and information feedback significantly impacted the faculty engagement. This study has enriched the literature by examining faculty engagement as a mediator. The reader can understand how significant is faculty engagement in facilitating the relationship between information flow and organizational commitment and between information feedback and organizational commitment. This study would enhance the current knowledge of the readers with regard to communication strategies, organizational commitment, and faculty engagement.

Practical Implications

This study provides some practical implications that are significant for the management of educational institutes. Based on the results of the result, communication strategies such as information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback are important factors for inducing organizational commitment among the faculty members. Therefore, the management of the institutes should enhance communication strategies by encouraging the employees to collaborate effectively. Hiring supportive leaders who can facilitate the smooth flow of information within the organization. Another way through which communication strategies can be improved is by having a decentralized system within the organization. Moreover, information flow and information feedback are important indicators that help to maximize faculty engagement. Engagement of the faculty can be measured using performance appraisals; hence, the performance appraisals must be conducted quarterly to examine how engaged the faculty members are. Therefore, the role of communication strategies is crucial for improving organizational commitment and faculty engagement.

Limitations and Recommendations

Although this study was designed to study English language teachers, in the future studies, other subject teachers can also be considered. Western regions and other Asian countries (apart from China) might show different results as the context of the study would be changed in the future studies. Moreover, increasing the sample size would be beneficial in generalizing the data. In the future studies, a mixed approach can be deployed to have an in-depth understanding of the relationship between study variables. This study examined the role of three different communication strategies, i.e., information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback on organizational commitment with the mediation of faculty engagement. The future studies can examine the role of faculty motivation as a mediator and organizational support as a moderator in the relationship between communication strategies and organizational commitment.

CONCLUSION

Fostering organizational commitment for the employees is necessary for the organization to deliver high-quality service to the end-user. In this regard, organizations are seeking ways to enhance organizational commitment through communication strategies. Therefore, this study investigated the role of communication strategies (i.e., information flow, information adequacy, and information feedback) on organizational commitment with the mediation of faculty engagement among English language teachers in China. The outcome of the study demonstrated that information flow and information feedback significantly impact organizational commitment and faculty engagement. The analysis also revealed that information adequacy significantly impacts organizational commitment but has no relationship with faculty engagement. The mediation analysis demonstrated that faculty engagement mediated the relationship between information flow and organizational commitment; and between information feedback and organization commitment. However, faculty engagement did not mediate the relationship between information adequacy and organizational commitment among English language teachers in China.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Lanzhou City University, China. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

YM conceived, designed the concept, collected the data, wrote the article, read, and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX A (QUESTIONNAIRE)

Information flow

1. Information in our organization flows openly from the top of the organization downward.
2. Information in our organization flows openly to the top of the organization.
3. Information in our organization flows openly between workgroups/departments.
4. Information in our organization flows openly throughout the overall organization.

Information adequacy

1. Employees like me receive adequate information how we are being judged from the organization.
2. Employees like me receive adequate job performance information from the organization.
3. Employees like me receive adequate information about employee welfare from our organization.
4. Employees like me receive adequate information about our progress in our job from the organization.
5. Employees like me receive adequate information about the goals of the organization.
6. Employees like me receive adequate information about changes within our organization.
7. Employees like me receive adequate information about policy within the organization.
8. Employees like me receive adequate information about accomplishments of the organization.
9. Employees like me receive adequate information how organization profits and standing.

Faculty engagement

1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.
2. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.
3. I am enthusiastic about my job.
4. My job inspires me.
5. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.
6. I feel happy when I am working intensely.
7. I am proud of the work that I do.
8. I am immersed in my work.
9. I get carried away when I am working.

Organizational commitment

1. I have a long-lasting bond with the organization I work for.
2. Compared to other potential employers, I value my relationship with the organization I work for more.
3. I would rather work together with this organization than not.
4. I feel that the organization I work for is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me.
5. I can see that the organization I work for wants to maintain a relationship with me.

Information feedback

1. My supervisor is usually available when I want performance information.
2. My supervisor is too busy to give me feedback.
3. I have little contact with my supervisor.
4. I interact with my supervisor on a daily basis.
5. The only time I receive performance feedback from my supervisor is during my performance review.

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH
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Impact of Perceived Product Value on Customer-Based Brand Equity: Marx's Theory – Value-Based Perspective

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Management research is allocating energies to seek ways to improve organizational performance. Branding has become a significant phenomenon that academicians and scholars have studied. Improving the brand's overall equity requires strategies that the brand managers must implement. Based on Marx's theory, the present study attempts to determine the role of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity, brand resonance and customer affective commitment, respectively. Moreover, this study also tries to determine the mediating roles of brand resonance and customer affective commitment in the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity, respectively. For this purpose, the data were gathered from 310 customers of branding products in China. The present study applied partial least square structural equation modeling for empirical analyses using Smart PLS software. The present study's findings acknowledge that product perceived value did not directly influence customer-based brand equity. However, results confirmed that product perceived value positively influences brand resonance and customer affective commitment. Furthermore, the outcomes of the present study also concluded that both brand resonance and affective commitment played a mediating role between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity, respectively. Theoretically, the study contributed to the literature by examining the influence of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity. The study also enriched the literature by providing key findings related to the mediating roles of brand resonance and customer affective commitment. Practically, the study is beneficial for the brands and they can enhance product perceived value by improving product design, effectively communicating product benefits, and executing effective promotional strategies.

Keywords: product perceived value, customer-based brand equity, brand resonance, customer affective commitment, Marx's theory

INTRODUCTION

Brands have played a significant role during the frenzy of acquisitions and mergers since the late 1980s. In the recent decade, brand valuation has shifted from developed economies to emerging economies which has changed the branding question considerably (Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali, 2021). In the present era of global marketing, branding strategy has become a significant indicator of the marketing mix and this factor is considered a key to achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Keller, 2021). Moreover, branding decisions have become a crucial factor for global marketing as the marketing managers are striving to capitalize the brand equity into reputable brands in the new economies. Globally, the efforts of the marketing managers can be seen in how they attract the attention of the customers and how well they build customer equity (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020).

Recently, studies in the discipline of customer-based brand equity have suggested a shift from measuring and conceptualizing the construct to examining the relationship with other concepts in the marketing domain (Surücü et al., 2019). Brand equity is a significant concept in the marketing-business practice and academic research as marketers can build strong brands and gain a competitive advantage (Keller, 2021). Customer-based brand equity is composed of five dimensions i.e., brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and other proprietary assets (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2021). A brand's customer-based brand equity is measured on the basis of how positively they react to a brand's element of the marketing mix as compared to the same element of the marketing mix for other similar brands. Customer-based brand equity takes place when customers recognize the brand and possess strong, favorable, and unique perceptions about the brand. According to Hyun et al. (2022), customer-based brand equity is derived from brand value and brand strength. Brand value is gained through high future and current profits and brand strength is the association of the brand held by its customers. The confidence of the customers placed in the brand generated higher customer-based brand equity. This confidence allows the customers to become loyal and willing to pay a higher price for the brand products (Stocchi et al., 2020).

Brand equity is measured by three factors i.e., uniqueness, perceived quality/perceived value, and willingness of the customers to pay the high price (Tuncer et al., 2020). This suggests that perceived value is an integral component of customer-based brand quality. Product perceived value is one of the categories of consumer behavior. It is the evaluation or subjective judgment of the customers toward the product and the benefits received by buying the product (El-Adly, 2019). Product perceived value influences both purchase decisions and brand cognition of the customers. The perceived value is highly dependent on the benefits offered to the customer as the higher the benefits are, the more perceived value will be developed among the customers (Wang et al., 2019). Product perceive value is not related to the product price as cost-effective products can have higher perceived value if those products can solve customers' problems effectively and quickly. In addition, there are mainly two dimensions of product perceived value i.e., perceived acquisition value which focuses on the gains received from the products. The other dimension of the perceived transaction value relates to the psychological pleasure or satisfaction of the customer after purchasing the product (Slack et al., 2020). Product perceived value is a significant construct in consumer behavior literature as it influences other consumer behavior aspects. For example, Chen and Lin (2019) suggested that perceived value directly impacts the repurchase intentions of the consumers. This indicates that perceived value is a factor that must be highly considered by the marketers and the organizations.

Brand resonance is referred to as the relationship between the brand and its customers including the willingness of the customers to buy and recommend the band to others (Duman et al., 2018). It is also how they perceive the value and goals of a particular brand. The experiences of the customers with the brand have the power to build a stronger brand resonance. The brand generally adds value to its products so that the consumers like the brand add develop repurchase intention toward the brand. Product evaluations developed by the brands help the customers to understand the brand, especially those products that are complex and manufactured by foreign companies not known to local consumers (Cheng et al., 2019). In other words, brand loyalty and equity are highly influenced by brand resonance. Brand resonance consists of four main aspects i.e., a sense of community, behavioral loyalty, active engagement, and attitudinal attachment (Husain et al., 2022). In order to develop brand resonance, consumers have to use the products of the brands more frequently and pay high attention to the information related to the brand to form a strong psychological engagement with the brand (Lithopoulos et al., 2021).

Customer affective commitment is developed as a result of the passionate connection of the customers with the brand that demonstrates personal identifications (Farid and Niu, 2021). Both mutual value and identification are closely related to affective commitment. Khraiwish et al. (2022) opined that affective commitment is deeply rooted in the attachment of the customers with the brand. Putting differently, the emotional attachment of the brand is also known as affective commitment. The consumers who are genuinely committed to the brand have an emotional attachment to the brand, thus the affective commitment is higher among these customers (Iglesias et al., 2019). In the literature, affective commitment has two dominant co-dimensions, i.e., continuance commitment and normative commitment. Both of these dimensions strongly impact the attitudes of the consumers. When customers experienced high affective commitment, they remain attached to the brand (Jaiswal and Dhar, 2016). Customers who have a high affective commitment not only become loyal to the brand but also tend to show repurchase behavior. Research shows that affective commitment of the consumers toward a brand is established as a result of high service or product value. Moreover, developing affective commitment require time as it builds over time. However, affective commitment has a long-term effect on the brands' performance (Rather et al., 2019).

Wang et al. (2008) examined the factors of customer-based with product-market outcome approaches with brand resonance

and quality perception as mediators. The authors suggested that future studies must analyze the determinants of brand equity such as perceived value in the existing model. Moreover, only a handful of studies have empirically analyzed the relationship between perceived value and customer-based brand equity. In addition, limited studies showed the factors affecting customer-based brand equity. Scare literature is available with regards to the mediating effect of brand resonance. Considering these shortfalls, the present study aimed to examine the role of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity with the mediating role of brand resonance. Moreover, Mbango (2018) analyzed the influence of customer satisfaction on repurchase intention with the mediation of affective commitment. The researchers argued that affective commitment must be studied with other variables related to new branded products. Therefore, the current study incorporated customer affective commitment as a mediator in the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity on branded products.

Based on the gap found in the literature, the present study postulated some objectives which are: to examine the impact of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity, to analyze the effect of product perception on brand resonance, and to determine the impact of product perceive value on customer affective commitment. The study has two mediating variables i.e., brand resonance and customer affective commitment, so the study has formulated the objective based on these constructs. The objectives are: (1) to investigate the mediating role of brand resonance in the relationship between product perceive value and customer-based brand equity and (2) to analyze the mediating role of customer affective commitment in the relationship between product perceive value and customer-based brand equity.

The current study also posited the research questions which have been addressed. The research questions are: what is the impact of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity? What is the effect of the product perceived on brand resonance? And what is the impact of product perceived value on customer affective commitment? The study has two mediating variables i.e., brand resonance and customer affective commitment, so the study has formulated the questions on the basis of these constructs. The research questions are: does brand resonance mediate the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity and does customer affective commitment mediate the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The study was conducted in China and the data was acquired from the customers who purchase branded products. This research intends to analyze the role of product perceived value and customer-based brand equity with the mediations of brand resonance and customer affective commitment. To address the objectives of the study, the study established the hypotheses which are based on the following theory.

Marx's Theory

Marx's theory was developed by Marx in 1954 as a critique of the school of human relations. According to this perspective, organizations are not the rational system to perform work efficiently, rather organizational systems are power systems designed for the maximization of profits and control. Marx's value-based perspective consists of two dimensions i.e., the sphere of production and the sphere of circulation. These spheres focus on the process of capital accumulation. According to Marx, there are three core values in the organizational context, i.e., use value, exchange value, and value. Use value is defined as the physical or other characteristics of a product that induce the demand for that product. It is the product utility. Exchange value highlights the monetary value given by the individuals in exchange for the product. It is the money from value. Value is referred to as the labor time embodied in the product. According to Marx's perspective, value is socially necessary for provoking benefits for the organization (Bowman and Toms, 2010).

Considering the framework of the study, product perceived value impacts customer-based brand equity, brand resonance, and customer affective commitment with the mediations of brand resonance and customer affective commitment. The relationship between the variables has been borrowed from Marx's theory which points out that value are a significant facet of building an organization. The value-based perspective highlights the importance of value provided by the organization either use value, exchange value, or value. This theory is deeply rooted in the framework of the study (see **Figure 1**).

Relationship Between Product Perceived Value and Customer-Based Brand Equity

Perceived value is the key facet and is regarded as an important factor of most customer-based brand equity frameworks (Surücü et al., 2019). Product perceived value mainly focuses on the assessment of the customer with regards to the utility of the brand on the basis of their perceptions of what they have received in terms of satisfaction and quality and what they have given in terms of money and other non-monetary costs. Perceived value is considered a significant aspect that leads toward customer-based brand equity (Wu et al., 2020). Perceived value includes experiential, functional, and symbolic attributes and functions. Moreover, scholars argued that perceive value includes perceived quality in such a way that when perceived quality is high, consumers develop high perceived value (Kim et al., 2021). Therefore, perceived quality is included in the judgment of perceived value.

Perceived value plays a significant role in building brand equity because customers need high value from the products. Customer-based brand equity consists of five major determinants, i.e., value, commitment, trust, social image, and performance. These determinants contribute greatly to developing customer-based brand equity. For example, Iglesias et al. (2019) undertook a study to examine the role of customer satisfaction, commitment, and brand experience on customer-based brand equity and found that these factors positively affect customer-based brand equity. Perceived value and

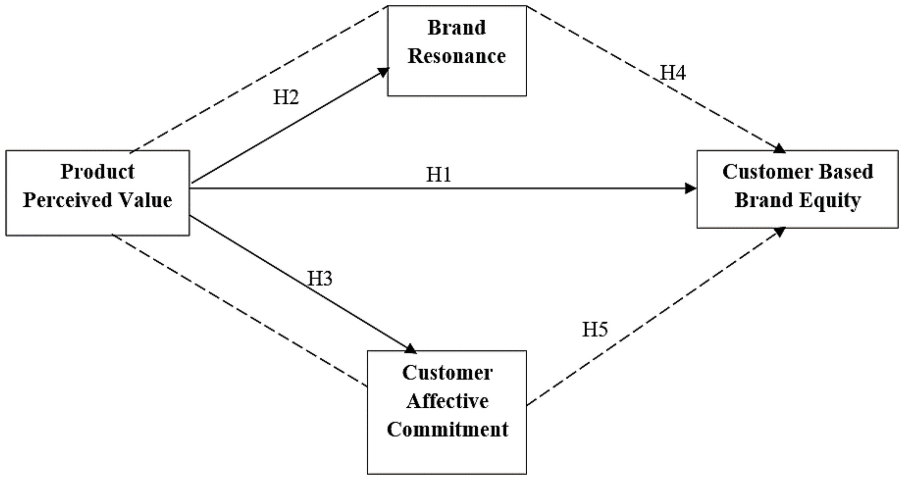

FIGURE 1 | Theoretical framework.

customer-based brand equity are closely related because one of the dimensions of customer-based brand equity is product value (Dian et al., 2021). The product value offered to the customers by the brands can either increase or decrease the brand equity such that if the product value is high, brand equity will increase (Armawan, 2021). From the point of view of the customers, brand equity is the value offered to the target customers (Gallart-Camahort et al., 2021). Aaker's model highlights the brand value and brand equity to measure and modularizes the overall brand equity. This model also suggests that product value is a significant component of brand equity and these constructs are gelled together (Ertemel and Civelek, 2020). Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) significantly contributes to the overall success of the brand. Ruan et al. (2020) opined that customer-based brand equity is developed as a result of perceived value because when the products offer high value to the customer, the brand equity increases. Moreover, studies also pointed out the fact that brand equity is an intangible factor that is based on the judgment and measurement of the perceived value (DAM, 2020). Moreover, perceived value can be explained as the difference between the total product value and total product cost. The total product value is the benefits acquired by the customers from the product and the total product cost is the energy time and money given by the customer during the purchase. If the total product value is higher than the total product cost then the product's perceived value is high (Lee et al., 2020).

Few studies have been conducted to understand how perceived value impacts customer-based brand equity. For example, Yan and Yan (2019) studied the influence of customer perceived value on brand equity. The results showed that all three types of values (i.e., emotional value, functional value, and cost) have a positive effect on brand equity among customers in China. Jahanzeb et al. (2013) also examine the impact of service quality on brand equity with the mediations of perceived value and corporate credibility. The findings revealed that service quality positively influences brand equity and both perceived value and corporate credibility mediate the relationship. These findings showed that perceived value has a positive association with brand equity. Although few studies have examined the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity, still this relationship is not extensively tested and this further validation is required. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated:

> H_1. *Product Perceived Value has a positive association with Customer-Based Brand Equity.*

Relationship Between Product Perceived Value and Brand Resonance

(Keller, 2021) explained that brand resonance in terms of the association between the brand and its customers that brand resonance develops when the consumers sense the brand and establish emotional resonance with the brand. The four components of brand resonance are behavioral loyalty, attachment, sense of community, and active engagement. Loyalty indicates the value received by the customers which in turn develops customer buying behavior (Duman et al., 2018). This signifies that value is deeply associated with brand resonance. In addition, the relationship between perceived value and brand resonance can be explained through customer experience. The brand experience emphasizes the depth of the psychological bond which is built through the high perceived value of the product (Cheng et al., 2019). A pleasant experience creates brand awareness and enables the consumers to make a purchase decision and develop brand resonance.

Perceived value influences customer satisfaction such that when the customers receive high value from the product, they get satisfied. This satisfaction then leads to brand resonance. In this regard, (Jang et al., 2021) claimed that perceived value maximizes the satisfaction of the customers which in turn helps to build brand resonance. Moreover, (Khan et al., 2022) empirically tested the relationship between brand relationship quality and utility value on brand resonance using social exchange theory among Halal food consumers. The results confirmed that utility

value has a positive association with brand resonance and brand relationship quality mediated the relationship. Moreover, from the consumer's perspective, product value increases due to product utilization which leads to better performance of the product (Hwang et al., 2018). A study conducted on product quality and brand loyalty showed that higher quality leads to high brand loyalty (Husain et al., 2022). It indicates that utility value positively impacts brand loyalty and perceived value leads to long term bond of the customer with the brand. Thus, perceived value has a strong association with brand loyalty which is one of the dimensions of brand resonance.

The value offered to the customer builds brand image and reputation which consequently impacts brand resonance (Wang and Lin, 2021). The customers also require brand knowledge so that they can relate to the brand and understand what the brand offers. High-quality products offered to the customer develop high perceive value among the customers because quality matters to a greater extent when it comes to purchasing decisions (Lithopoulos et al., 2021). Additionally, brand resonance is particularly associated it how the consumers relate to the brand. If the value of the products is high, only then the consumers can relate and develop a positive perception of the brand. Only a few studies have examined the relationship between perceived value and brand resonance. For example, (Wang and Lin, 2021) examined the relationship between experiential value, celebrity endorsement, and brand resonance. The study confirmed that experiential value is associated with brand resonance through celebrity endorsement. Very scarce literature is available that explained the relationship between product perceived value and brand resonance. There is a need to analyze this association. Therefore, the present study aimed to address this gap in the literature, and posited the following hypothesis:

> ***H_2.*** *Product Perceived Value has a positive impact on Brand Resonance.*

Relationship Between Product Perceived Value and Customer Affective Commitment

Customers make a purchase decision on the basis of their evaluation in terms of how good their experience was with the brand (Gallart-Camahort et al., 2021). For example, if the product's perceived value was high, they regard it as a pleasurable and satisfactory experience. In addition, when the experience of the customers with the product outperforms their experience, they perceive that product to have high value (Farid and Niu, 2021). Customers build a positive attitude toward the branded product if the product performance is higher than expected. This attitude enables the customers to purchase branded products (Khraiwish et al., 2022). Moreover, customers provide their judgment of the product based on the overall quality and the value obtained from buying the product. The products that have high quality and value are preferred by the customers as a result they show repurchase behavior (Husain et al., 2022). However, poor quality and low-value products of the brand are not only disliked by the customers but the customers tend to show a negative attitude toward the brand.

High product perceived value tends to contribute to the future commitment of the customers to the brands (Servera-Francés et al., 2019). Products with high value make the customer committed to the brand. Prior studies have shown that evaluation of the customers regarding product value based on their consumption experience leads to affective commitment (Kungumapriya and Malarmathi, 2018). A high level of product value is closely related to a strong relationship with the brand. In addition, customer affective commitment has a strong association with a brand's performance (Molinillo et al., 2021). The marketing literature showed that customers with high perceived value show a high level of brand loyalty which in turn influences customer affective commitment (Wu et al., 2020). This commitment enables the consumers to provide positive recommendations and referrals about the brand. Therefore, it becomes significant for the brand to deliver high-quality and high-value products to the customers, so that the brand can be benefited in the long run.

Kungumapriya and Malarmathi (2018) opined that affective commitment is developed as a result of brand loyalty because loyalty has been conceptualized as the strong commitment of the customers to repurchase the product. According to Servera-Francés et al. (2019), customers develop a positive attitude, such as affective commitment and brand loyalty, toward a particular brand if the brand provides high-value products. The relationship between product perceived value and customer affective commitment has not been widely explored. However, few studies have linked these variables through a third construct. For example, Roy et al. (2022) investigated the influence of customer experience and customer affective commitment among Australian retailers. The authors claimed that customer experience is positively associated with affective commitment and this experience gets pleasant with high perceived value. Similarly, Itani et al. (2019) analyzed the association of perceived value and product quality with customer engagement. The findings confirmed that perceived value and product quality have a significant relationship with customer engagement. These results indicate that perceived value is also positively associated with customer affective commitment. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

> ***H_3.*** *Product Perceived Value has a positive impact on Customer Affective Commitment.*

Mediating Role of Brand Resonance

Brand resonance is referred to as the relationship between the brand and the customer that includes the willingness of the customer to purchase or recommend the brand to others. The perception of the customers about the brand is built through their experiences and learning about the brand and what value they offer to the customers (Jang et al., 2021). Therefore, brands add value to the products by delivering meaning, and customers like brands as they package the meaning (Cheng et al., 2019). Product value significantly impacts brand resonance because when the customer receives highly valued products, they can relate to the brand. Put differently, brands can attract customers by providing products with a high value which leads to brand

equity (Kang et al., 2021). Additionally, Jang et al. (2021) claimed that perceived value maximizes the satisfaction of the customers which in turn helps to build brand resonance. These studies justify that brand resonance can be a mediator in the relationship between perceived value and brand equity.

One of the core dimensions of brand equity is brand loyalty, and brand loyalty is built when the customer can relate to or resonate with the brand (Husain et al., 2022). This resonance is deeply linked with perceived value because customer needs are fulfilled when they receive high valued products (Lithopoulos et al., 2021). Scholars argued that perceived value has a positive relationship with brand resonance and customer-based brand equity; therefore, brands that want to enhance brand resonance and CBBE must deliver high-value products (Kang et al., 2021). Brand resonance can help predict brand equity, future revenues, and firm value in competitive business markets. Brands win customers because they develop a deep relationship with the customers through different factors. In a sense, to develop this relationship brands deliver products that exceed the expectations of the customers (Rather et al., 2019). Branding marketing is deeply rooted in what the brand offers to the customers and how the customers perceive those products.

The mediating role of brand resonance has been explored in a few studies only. For instance, Khan et al. (2022) examined the mediating role of brand resonance in the relationship between quality and utility value among food consumers. The results confirmed that brand resonance is a significant mediator between quality and utility value. The researchers discussed that quality products enhance brand resonance which consequently maximizes utility value. A recent study by Duman et al. (2018) also determined the influence of affective factors on brand equity with the mediation of brand resonance among Turkish visitors. Duman et al. (2018) discussed based on the results obtained that affective factors significantly impact brand equity and brand resonance fully mediated the relationship. Husain et al. (2022) empirically tested the influence of brand experience on brand trust with the mediating effect of brand resonance. This study also showed that brand resonance mediated the relationship between brand experience and brand trust. On the basis of the above discussion and past literature, the author developed the hypothesis mentioned below:

> ***H_4.*** *Brand Resonance positively mediates the relationship between Product Perceived Value and Customer-Based Brand Equity.*

Mediating Role of Customer Affective Commitment

In the marketing literature, customer affective commitment plays a key role as it is a major determinant of influencing the brands (Syed and Shanmugam, 2021). Scholars argued that customer affective commitment is directly related to customer-based brand equity (Zang et al., 2021). For example, Poushneh et al. (2019) found that affective commitment reduces the switching behavior and prevents the customers to search for alternative brands (DAM, 2020). The switching behavior can be decreased with the high perceived value gained by the customer after purchasing the products from a particular brand (Armawan, 2021). Customers with low switching intentions show high commitment to the brand, thus enhancing brand equity. This traditional understanding of affective commitment as a behavior for the repurchase of a product constitutes brand equity. Customers call for high valued products and this perceived value then leads to affective commitment. Putting differently, customers build a positive attitude toward the branded product if the product performance is higher than expected.

More recently, scholars recognize affective commitment as a significant factor for the brands as it induces customer desire to recommend the brand to peers (Farid and Niu, 2021). The preference of the customer for one brand over others and affective commitment leads to higher brand equity and brand success. Scholars also argued that affective commitment is one of the dimensions of brand equity (Iglesias et al., 2019). Moreover, academicians also proposed that affective commitment and attachment with the brand are dimensions of customer-based brand equity. Brands consider commitment as an internal brand strength that can induce brand equity (Slack et al., 2020). Furthermore, brand equity is conceptualized as a measure of the strength of customer commitment to a brand. In this regard, Wang et al. (2008) claimed that affective commitment can be developed in customers with high product perceived value.

Among the scant literature available relating to customer affective commitment as a mediator, Rather et al. (2019) found that customer affective commitment mediated the relationship between customer word-of-mouth and customer involvement. Jeon and Yoo (2021) also examined the association of perceived value and customer engagement through the mediation of affective commitment. Based on the results of the study, the authors concluded that perceived value significantly impacts customer engagement and affective commitment, and affective commitment facilities the relationship among the customer of the hotel industry. Finally, Syed and Shanmugam (2021) analyzed the influence of corporate social responsibility on word-of-mouth with the mediating effects of affective commitment and customer trust. The empirical evidence revealed that affective commitment and customer trust fully mediated the relationship between corporate social and word-of-mouth. In line with the scant literature and aiming to gain further insights into the mediating role of affective commitment in the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity, the author proposed that:

> ***H_5.*** *Customer Affective Commitment positively mediates the relationship between Product Perceived Value and Customer-Based Brand Equity.*

Based on the above discussion and the literature, the authors developed the following conceptual framework (see **Figure 1**):

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study aims to identify the effect of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity through the mediating role of

brand resources and customer affective commitment. Hence, the present study data was gathered from consumers of various branded products in China. In this regard, the authors visited different brand outlets to seek permission for data collection from the customer. For this aim, they met with outlet managers, conveyed the complete data collection objective, and assured them that data would be collected only for educational purposes. The authors also guided the managers regarding the importance of the practical implication of the study for whom data would be collected. So, they also assured them that the practical implication would be shared upon their request. Hence, managers showed a positive response and were permitted to collect data.

The authors developed self-administrated questionnaires based on a cover letter for data collection. This cover letter conveyed the whole objective of data collection to the participants as this study helps the organizations ensure better services and products based on customers' views. Moreover, through the cover letter, it was also conveyed that no answers are right and wrong as their true answers would help in generating natural outcomes for this study. Hence, this step boosts the confidence of the customers to get as natural as possible responses. The questionnaire was first developed in English and then translated into Chinese as English was not common in China for speaking and reading. Hence, the authors developed dual-language questionnaires to ease the customers' understanding. Translation of questionnaires was completed under the guidance of senior researchers. As per their guidance, the author also collected sample base data from students on dual language questionnaires for language proficiency examination. In this way, all errors and corrections were made, and the senior researchers approved finalized questionnaire.

The authors adopted a convenient sampling technique for data collection from customers. They took two weeks for data collection and personally visited different brand outlets and gave approximately 8 h a day to collect data. They also requested all the visitors and customers of different outlets for questionnaire filling and offers soft drinks to customers to fill out the questionnaires. In this way, the authors targeted 350 customers and got back 350 questionnaires. After confirming their completeness and validness, they finalized 310 responses for data analysis. Hence, this study's empirical analyses are based on a 310 sample size.

Measures

The present study participants' responses were measured based on five points Likert scale. This scale has five numbers where 1 represents "strongly disagree," 2 represents "disagree," 3 represents "neutral," 4 represents "agree," and 5 represents "strongly agree." This study assessed data from previously validated items. The construct perceived product value was measured with five items scale adapted from Agarwal and Teas (2001). The construct brand resource was measured with six items scale adapted from Wang et al. (2008). The construct of customer affective commitment was measured with a five-items scale adapted from Dean (2007). The construct customer-based brand equity was measured with four items scale adapted from Boonghee et al. (2000). All variables items are presented in **Appendix 1**.

RESULTS

Assessment of Measurement and Structural Model

The present study applied the variance-based partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique instead of other co-variance-based techniques such as AMOS. The basic purpose behind this selection is the effectiveness of PLS-SEM for both types of studies (confirmatory and exploratory) (Hair et al., 2011). Structural equation modeling (SEM) consists of two different types, which include covariance-based (CB-SEM) and PLS-SEM. The key difference in both methods is that CB-SEM is considered for theory acceptance and rejection, while PLS-SEM is considered for advancing and developing the theories (Avotra et al., 2021; Nawaz et al., 2021; Yingfei et al., 2021). PLS-SEM is an appropriate approach for complex and multi-orders-based models and needs no specific data normality conditions. PLS-SEM is also useful for evaluating small data sets (Hair et al., 2016). Hence, the present study considers the PLS-SEM method for empirical data analyses using Smart PLS 3.3.3 software. The outcomes of PLS-SEM-based analysis are evaluated in two stages, including model measurement and structural model evaluation. The measurement model stage assesses the reliability and validity of the constructs, whereas the structural model analyzes the relationship between the proposed hypotheses. The acceptance or rejection of a hypothesis is determined through the t statistic and *p* values.

The results of model measurement consist of two parts: model reliability and validity. The present study considered the values of "Cronbach's alpha, roh-A, composite reliability, and average variance extract (AVE)" to approve the model's reliability (Hair et al., 2016), and all values are presented in **Table 1**. The values of Cronbach's alpha are accepted if they are greater than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019b). In the same way, the composite reliability value should also be greater than 0.7. The Cronbach's alpha values of models' constructs (brand resonance, customer affective commitment, customer-based brand equity, and product perceived value) are 0.895, 0.872, 0.849, 0.884 and the composite reliability values of models' constructs are 0.920, 0.907, 0.896, and 0.915, respectively. All values of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability are according to acceptable criteria, which confirm the model's reliability in the present study. The values of roh-A reliability (0.899, 0.874, 0.863, 0.886) are also according to acceptable criteria (Hair et al., 2019b). The average variance extract (AVE) values greater than 0.5 are considered appropriate for the model's convergent validity (Hair et al., 2011). The **Table 1** illustrates that the AVE values (0.658, 0.662, 0.684, and 0.684) are according to acceptable criteria.

Table 1 reported that the current study model is based on 20 items of the four variables. According to acceptable criteria, the outer loading values greater than or equal to 0.7 are considered reliable for the model's validity (Hair et al., 2019b). **Figure 2** depicts that the outer loading values of all items are according to the acceptance criteria. One item (BR6) shows the outer loading value of 0.699, which is below 0.7 but retained because this item did not affect the AVE value. The variance inflation

TABLE 1 | Reliability and convergent validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Item	Outer loadings	VIF	Alpha	roh-A	Composite reliability	AVE
BR	BR1	0.847	2.633	0.895	0.899	0.920	0.658
	BR2	0.803	2.227				
	BR3	0.842	2.611				
	BR4	0.821	2.630				
	BR5	0.843	2.803				
	BR6	0.699	1.502				
CAC	CAC1	0.853	2.387	0.872	0.874	0.907	0.662
	CAC2	0.773	1.899				
	CAC3	0.814	2.004				
	CAC4	0.802	1.986				
	CAC5	0.824	2.012				
CBBE	CBBE1	0.838	2.362	0.849	0.863	0.896	0.684
	CBBE2	0.850	3.287				
	CBBE3	0.867	3.488				
	CBBE4	0.749	1.294				
PPV	PPV1	0.838	2.223	0.884	0.886	0.915	0.684
	PPV2	0.790	1.893				
	PPV3	0.835	2.260				
	PPV4	0.878	2.949				
	PPV5	0.792	2.078				

PPV = Product Perceived Value, CBBE = Customer-Based Brand Equity, BR = Brand Resonance, CAC = Customer Affective Commitment.

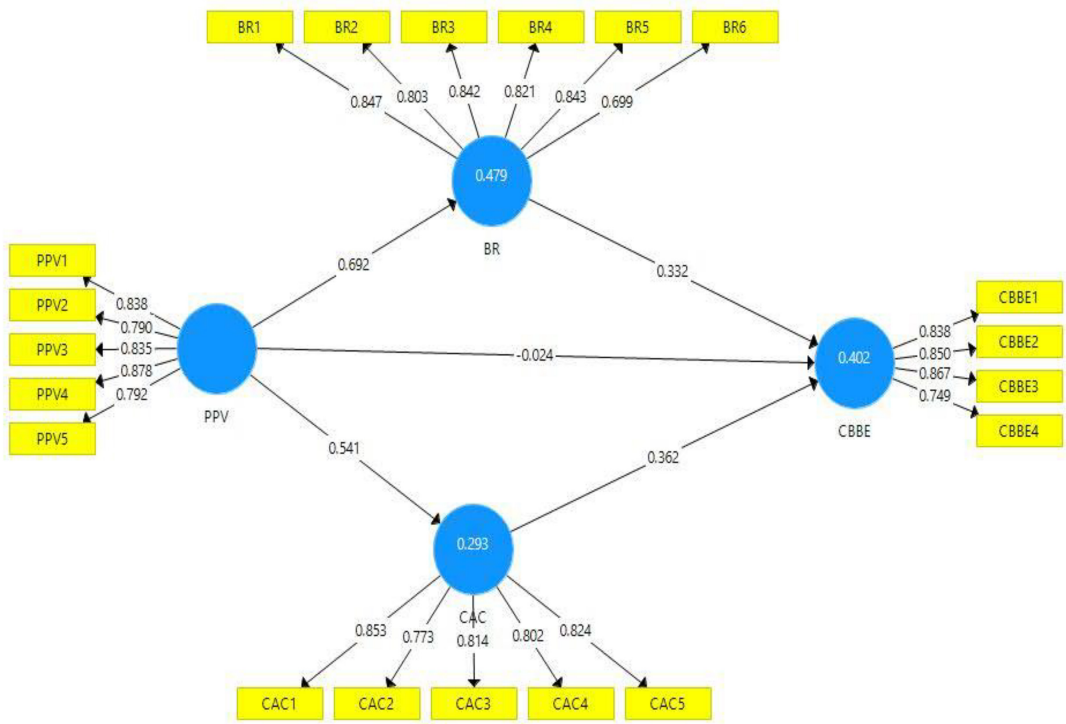

FIGURE 2 | Output of measurement model. PPV = Product Perceived Value, CBBE = Customer-Based Brand Equity, BR = Brand Resonance, AC = Affective Commitment.

factor (VIF) values are also displayed in **Table 1**. The VIF values are evaluated to verify the collinearity issues in the model. The model is considered free from the collinearity problems if the VIF values are reported below 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019b). According to the outcomes presented in **Table 1**, the VIF values are less than 0.5, such as the variable "customer-based brand equity" item

TABLE 2 | Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larker-1981 Criteria).

Construct	BF	CAC	CBBE	PPV
BR	***0.811***			
CAC	0.748	***0.814***		
CBBE	0.587	0.598	***0.827***	
PPV	0.692	0.541	0.402	***0.827***

PPV = Product Perceived Value, CBBE = Customer-Based Brand Equity, BR = Brand Resonance, CAC = Customer Affective Commitment.

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Construct	BF	CAC	CBBE	PPV
BR	–	–	–	–
CAC	0.846	–	–	–
CBBE	0.640	0.657	–	–
PPV	0.778	0.616	0.448	–

PPV = Product Perceived Value, CBBE = Customer-Based Brand Equity, BR = Brand Resonance, CAC = Customer Affective Commitment.

CBBE-3 has the highest VIF value (3.488). Hence, it is proved that there are no collinearity issues in the current study model (Hair et al., 2016).

The R^2 values are measured to describe the model's strength, such as the values of latent variables exceeding or near 0.5, which indicates moderate strength of the model, and the values near 0.25 show weak model strength (Hair et al., 2017). The R^2 values of endogenous variables of the present study' model (Brand Resonance, Affective Commitment, Customer-Based Brand Equity) are 0.479, 0.293, and 0.402, respectively, which shows moderate model strength (Hair et al., 2019a). The cross-validated redundancy (Q^2) values of the model are considered significant if they are larger than zero (Hair et al., 2017). The Q^2 values of all latent variables of the current study are greater than zero, which validates the significance of the model.

The two well-known approaches, namely, Fornell–Larcker criterion and Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratios, are used to evaluate the discriminant validity of the current study (Hair et al., 2011). The Fornell-Larcker criterion is evaluated by taking the square roots of AVE values of model constructs (Hair et al., 2014). The Forenell-Larcker criterion values of variables are presented in **Table 2**. The values under the Forenell-Larcker criterion are accepted if the upper side first value of each column is highest than their below values. **Table 2** shows that all values of the Forenell-Larcker criterion are as per the accepted criteria. Thus, it is confirmed that discriminant validity based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion has been achieved in this study model. In addition, according to the given criteria, the HTMT values of all constructs should be less than 0.85; however, values greater than 0.90 are also considerable (Nawaz et al., 2019; An et al., 2021; Xiaolong et al., 2021). According to the outcomes of the present study, the HTMT values of constructs are less than 0.85, which confirmed that discriminant validity in the present study's model has been established (**Table 3**).

HYPOTHESES ANALYSIS

Direct Effect

The empirical investigation of the current study was accompanied by using a bootstrapping approach through 5000 samples with replacements to measure the significance level. The direct, indirect, and total paths are presented in **Table 4**. The present study considered the "*t*" values and "*p*" values of statistics for the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses. The current study hypothesis results are shown in **Table 5**. According to hypothesis 1, product perceived value positively impacts customer-based brand equity; however, the outcomes ($t = 0.350$, $p = 0.726$) depicted product perceived value does not positively impact customer-based brand equity. Hence, the first hypothesis of this study is rejected. The outcomes ($t = 12.876$, $p = 0.000$) of hypothesis 2 confirmed that the product's perceived value positively impacts brand resonance, which means the second hypothesis of the present study is accepted. In addition, the beta value of hypothesis 2 revealed that one unit change in the independent variable (Product Perceived Value) would result in 0.692 changes in the dependent variable (Brand Resonance). According to the results (t = 6.714, p = 0.000) of the third hypothesis, product perceived value positively impacts customer affective commitment, confirming that the second assumption

TABLE 4 | Direct, indirect and total path estimates.

Direct path	Beta	SD	T	P
BR -> CBBE	0.332	0.078	4.254	**0.000**
CAC -> CBBE	0.362	0.075	4.865	**0.000**
PPPV -> BR	0.692	0.054	12.876	**0.000**
PPPV -> CAC	0.541	0.081	6.714	**0.000**
PPV -> CBBE	−0.024	0.068	0.350	**0.726**
Indirect path	**Beta**	**SD**	**T**	**P**
PPV -> BR -> CBBE	0.230	0.059	3.894	**0.000**
PPV -> CAC -> CBBE	0.196	0.056	3.490	**0.000**
Total path	**Beta**	**SD**	**T**	**P**
BR -> CBBE	0.332	0.078	4.254	**0.000**
CAC -> CBBE	0.362	0.075	4.865	**0.000**
PPPV -> BR	0.692	0.054	12.876	**0.000**
PPPV -> CAC	0.541	0.081	6.714	**0.000**
PPV -> CBBE	0.402	0.083	4.835	**0.000**

PPV = Product Perceived Value, CBBE = Customer-Based Brand Equity, BR = Brand Resonance, CAC = Customer Affective Commitment.

TABLE 5 | Hypotheses testing (Direct Effect).

Hypotheses		Coefficient (Beta)	S.D	*T*	*P*	Status
H1	PPV -> CBBE	−0.024	0.068	0.350	0.726	Not Supported
H2	PPV -> BR	0.692	0.054	12.876	0.000	Supported
H3	PPV -> CAC	0.541	0.081	6.714	0.000	Supported

PPV = Product Perceived Value, CBBE = Customer-Based Brand Equity, BR = Brand Resonance, CAC = Customer Affective Commitment.

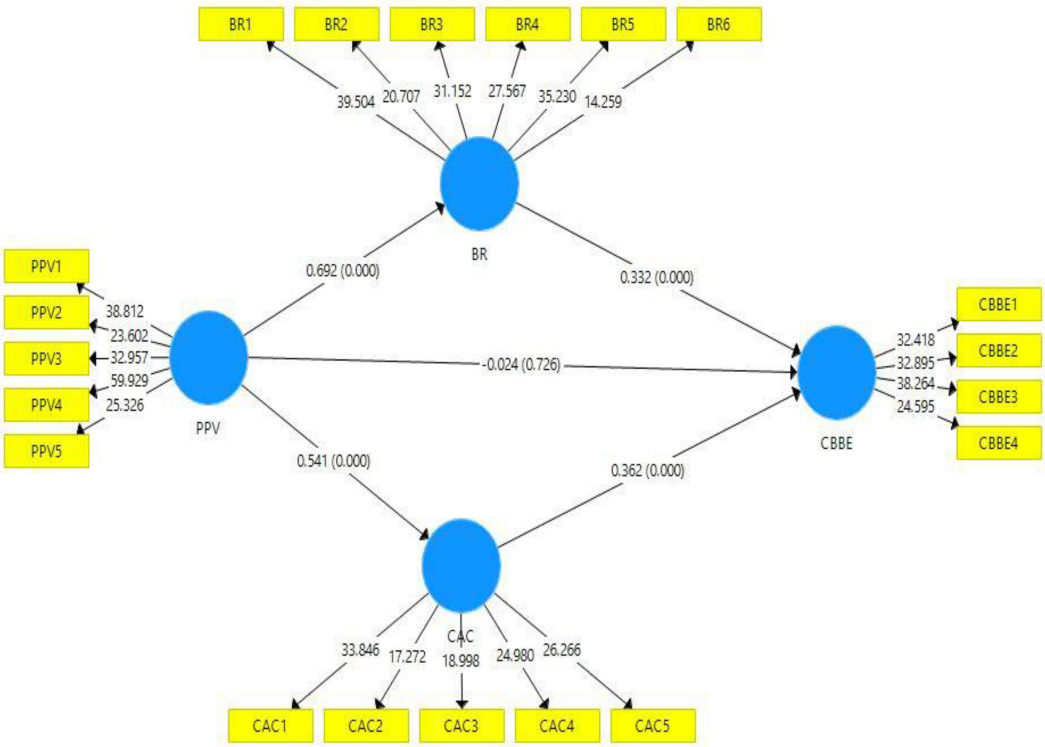

FIGURE 3 | Structural model bootstrapping. PPV = Product Perceived Value, CBBE = Customer-Based Brand Equity, BR = Brand Resonance, AC = Affective Commitment.

TABLE 6 | Hypotheses testing (Mediation).

	Paths	Direct effect (*t*-value)	Indirect effect (*t*-value)	Total effect	VAF%	Interpretation	Results
H4	PPV-> BR-> CBBE	−0.024 (0.350)	0.230 (3.894)	0.402 (4.835)	57.21	Partial Mediation	Supported
H5	PPV-> CAC-> CBBE	−0.024 (0.350)	0.196 (3.490)	0.402 (4.835)	48.75	Partial Mediation	Supported

PPV = Product Perceived Value, CBBE = Customer-Based Brand Equity, BR = Brand Resonance, CAC = Customer Affective Commitment.

of the present study is accepted. In addition, the beta value of H3 showed that one unit change in the independent variable (Product Perceived Value) would result in 0.541 changes in the dependent variable (Customer Affective Commitment).

Indirect Effect/Mediation

The present study also considered the mediating role of brand resonance and customer affective commitment between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity, respectively (**Figure 3**). For the empirical investigation of brand resonance and customer affective commitment as mediators, this study assumes hypotheses 4 and 5 (**Table 6**). The present study used the variance accounted for (VAF) approach to indicate the mediation level. The values of VAF greater than 80% show full mediation, values between 20 and 80% show partial mediation, and values less than 20%. The results of hypothesis 4 revealed that H4 is accepted, and the VAF value (57.21%) shows partial mediation. According to the outcomes, hypothesis 5 of the present study is also accepted, and the VAF value (48.75%) shows partial mediation.

DISCUSSION

In this turbulent era of competition, organizations seek ways to enhance performance and be more competitive in markets. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) point out that higher brand equity is a constructive indicator of future success and the long-term sustainability of the firms. Customer-based brand equity is a phenomenon that has become the point of attention from various researchers and scholars worldwide (Yan and Yan, 2019). Studies have been initiated to investigate how customer-based brand equity can be developed and enhanced. However, there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the various antecedents and predictors of brand-based equity. Based on Marx's theory, the present study attempts to determine the role of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity, brand resonance and customer affective commitment, respectively. Moreover, this study also tries to determine the mediating roles of brand resonance and customer affective commitment in the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity, respectively.

The outcomes of the present study depicted that hypothesis 1 (product perceived value has a positive impact on customer-based brand equity) is not accepted, which means that the product perceived value does not have a positive association with customer-based brand equity online. However, these results are not consistent with prior studies (Surücü et al., 2019; Yan and Yan, 2019), as these studies claimed that perceived value is the key facet and is regarded as an important factor in most customer-based brand equity frameworks. Moreover, the present study's findings confirmed that product perceived value positively impacts brand resonance and customer affective commitment, respectively, which means that hypotheses 2 and 3 are accepted. These findings are consistent with the findings of Roy et al. (2022), as they acknowledged that customers' brand experience has a critical role in building their affective commitment, and this experience gets pleasant with high perceived value. Similarly, these findings are also confirmed by Kungumapriya and Malarmathi (2018). From their point of view, affective commitment is developed due to brand loyalty because loyalty has been conceptualized as the strong commitment of the customers to repurchase the product. The reason is the benefits associated with the product perceived value to the customers of the brands.

The findings of hypothesis 4 revealed that brand resonance positively mediates the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity. Khan et al. (2022) also confirmed that brand resonance is a significant mediator between quality and utility value. Additionally, the results are consistent with the findings obtained by Husain et al. (2022). They empirically tested the influence of brand experience on brand trust with the mediating effect of brand resonance and found that brand resonance mediated the relationship between brand experience and brand trust. Brand resonance is developed when the brand provides high valued products to the customers, consequently impacting customer-based brand equity.

The findings of hypothesis 5 confirmed that customer affective commitment positively mediates the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity. Jeon and Yoo (2021) also found that customer affective commitment plays a constructive role in strengthening the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity. Binu Raj (2021) concluded that perceived value significantly impacts customer engagement, and affective commitment and affective commitment facilitate the relationship among the customer of the hotel industry. Similarly, Slack et al. (2020) also revealed that brands consider commitment as an internal brand strength that can induce brand equity. Affective commitment is developed as a result of perceived value and this, in turn, influences customer-based brand equity.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This research study contributes in the body of literature in several significant ways. Existing research depicts that there are limited literature exists which explore the predictors of consumer-based brand equity (Mbango, 2018). Moreover, only a handful of studies have empirically analyzed the relationship between perceived value and customer-based brand equity. In addition, limited studies showed the factors affecting customer-based brand equity. Khan et al. (2022) suggest that future studies must analyze the predictors of consumer-based brand equity (Ertemel and Civelek, 2020). Thus this study extends the limited literature of consumer-based brand equity by exploring some key predictors of consumer-based brand equity. In addition to this, literature reveals that very scare literature exists which explore the mediation effect of brand resonance. Considering these shortfalls, the present study aimed to examine the role of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity with the mediating role of brand resonance. Moreover, there was a paucity of research with regards to how brand resonance and affective commitment mediate the relationship between perceived product value and customer-based brand equity (Iglesias et al., 2019). This study successfully bridged this gap by establishing the indirect effects of brand resonance and affective commitment. It was established that both brand resonance and affective commitment are important factors that indirectly influence the development of customer-based brand equity.

Moreover, analyzed the influence of customer satisfaction on repurchase intention with the mediation of affective commitment. The researchers argued that affective commitment must be studied with other variables related to new branded products. Therefore, the current study incorporated customer affective commitment as a mediator in the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity on branded products.

The results of this study also yield some important practical implications. It becomes imperative for the branding and marketing managers of various brands to undertake efforts and implement strategies to enhance the perceived value of their product offerings. The enhancement of perceived value will lead to the development of positive behavioral outcomes such as an increase in customer-brand-based equity. Some of the ways in which product perceived value can be enhanced include: improving product design, effectively communicating product benefits, and executing effective promotional strategies. Moreover, the marketing managers and organizations should also focus on enhancing brand resonance and affective commitment of the customers toward the brand. To achieve this, the organization should focus on establishing brand awareness and developing strong relationships between the organization and its customer base. This can be achieved by providing exceptional customer service and by implementing high values of transparency and customer-centricity.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Like other studies of social sciences, the current study also has some limitations, which may motivate scholars to conduct the research in the future. The sample size of this study was small and hence the results may not be generalizable; future studies may enlarge the sample size to enhance the reliability of the results. This study is conducted on Chinese customers only;

future studies may expand the scope to other regions to enhance the reliability of the results. Moreover, a cross-sectional design was adopted by the present study. Future researchers should adopt a longitudinal design by acquiring data over multiple time intervals to enhance the credibility of the results. This study analyzed the impact of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity through the mediating mechanisms of brand resonance and affective commitment. Future studies should introduce other mediating variables such as perceived brand image, customer engagement, and brand awareness to broaden the understanding of the various antecedents and predictors of customer-based brand equity.

CONCLUSION

In this era of competition, firms are seeking ways to enhance performance and be more competitive in markets. Customer-based brand equity is a phenomenon that has become the point of attention for various researchers and scholars worldwide. Studies have been initiated to investigate how customer-based brand equity can be developed and enhanced. However, there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the various antecedents and predictors of brand-based equity. Based on Marx's theory, the present study attempts to determine the role of product perceived value on customer-based brand equity, brand resonance and customer affective commitment, respectively. Moreover, this study also tries to determine the mediating roles of brand resonance and customer affective commitment in the relationship between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity, respectively. The present study's findings acknowledge that product perceived value did not directly influence customer-based brand equity. However, results confirmed that product perceived value positively influences brand resonance and customer affective commitment. Furthermore, the outcomes of the present study also concluded that both brand resonance and affective commitment played a mediating role between product perceived value and customer-based brand equity, respectively.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Harbin Normal University, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

GX conceived and designed the concept. XY collected the data. YQ wrote the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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APPENDIX 1 | Constructs and their items.

Items	Measures
Perceived Product Value	1. This product is a very good value for money. 2. At the price shown, this product is very economical. 3. I consider this product to be a good buy. 4. The price shown for this product is very acceptable. 5. This product appears to be a bargain.
Customer-based Brand Equity	1. It makes sense to buy X instead of any other brand, even if they are the same. 2. Even if another brand has same features as X, I would prefer to buy X. 3. If there is another brand as good as X, I prefer to buy X. 4. If another brand is not different from X in any way, it seems smarter to purchase X.
Affective Commitment	1. I really care about the fate of this company 2. I feel a great deal of loyalty to this company 3. I am willing to put in effort to help this company be successful 4. I feel a sense of belonging to this company 5. My relationship with this company is very important to me
Brand Resonance	1. I would like to buy this brand 2. I consider myself to be loyal to this brand 3. I am willing to recommend this brand to my friends 4. I am used to this brand 5. This brand would be my first choice 6. I will not buy other brands if this brand is available at the store

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Impact of Organizational Brand-Building Strategies on Organizational Brand Equity: A Moderating Role of Brand-Oriented Leadership

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In this era of competition, branding is an essential marketing tool for organizations to compete in today's dynamic markets. Organizations should realize the importance of employee-based brand equity from the perspectives of customer branding and financial performance. Employee-based brand equity plays a crucial role in building organizational brand equity. This study conceptualized a model that helps the practitioners to build employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity. This study examines the role of organizational brand-building strategies and brand-oriented leadership in promoting employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity. This study collected data from the employees of various beverage companies in China. This study analyzed data through partial least square structural equation modeling using Smart PLS 3. This study found a positive direct association between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity. However, according to the results, no direct association was found between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity. This study also confirms that organizational brand-building strategies indirectly promote organizational brand equity through employee-based brand equity. Moreover, this study demonstrates that brand-oriented leadership directly influences employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity but negatively moderates the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity. No moderation was found in the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity. Finally, the practical and theoretical implications of this study are discussed.

Keywords: organizational brand building strategies, employee-based brand equity, organizational brand equity, brand-oriented leadership, signaling theory, theory of motivation

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INTRODUCTION

Branding is one of the powerful tools for organizations to compete in today's competitive market (Hasni et al., 2018). Organizations use branding to create a competitive advantage and to be more sustainable in the market (Shocker and Aaker, 1993). The concept of branding was mostly associated with products and services in the preceding decades, but now literature admits

the importance of branding from the perspective of human resources. This shift of thoughts illuminated the important role of human capital (such as employees) in the successful branding of the organization (King and Grace, 2010). In this era of competition, organizations are now recognizing the importance of the intellectual abilities of employees. The importance of tangible assets for the successful branding of organizations cannot be denied, but they have to admit the significance of human capital (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020).

The efforts put by organizations for the creation of branding assist the firms in achieving their goals of establishing brand equity (Fernández-Ruano et al., 2022). Further, they give arguments and say that higher brand equity is an encouraging indication of the sustainability of organizations. Branding could be used from a multi-dimensional perspective by organizations; however, it is considered internal branding when practiced among employees (Hasni et al., 2018). Internal branding is a precursor for employee-based brand equity (EBBE) because employees have a critical role in transforming brand capacities from organizations to customers. Huang and Sarigöllü (2014) argue that an organization's brand equity positively influences when employees efficiently transform the promise of the organization toward the customer. Further, they point out that role of employees in the creation of brand equity is very crucial as organizations are always making efforts to deliver promises accurately. However, scholars noticed that EBBE is ignored in the literature despite its importance in the organization's long-term success (Silverthorne, 2004; King and Grace, 2010; Erkmen, 2018; Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020). King and Grace (2009) also point out that literature is enriched with financial- and consumer-based brand equity, but there is a dearth in the literature on brand equity from employees' perspectives.

Organizations have to divert their attention toward value addition with employees' perspectives to be more competitive in the market (Erkmen, 2018). This study attempts to recognize the importance of EBBE for organizations. This paper is an effort to strengthen the literature on EBBE by shedding light on some important aspects which can play an important role in the creation process of EBBE. Organizations have to put considerable effort into creating brand equity from the perspective of employees (Foroudi, 2020). Firm brand-building strategies are beneficial tools for improving organizational branding. Organizational brand-building strategies are the long-term planning tools for creating brand equity. Vallaster and Lindgreen (2011) illuminated the importance of brand-building strategies and said that appropriately established approaches of organization could filter the attitude and behavior of employees about branding. Further, the efforts invested by organizations in these types of strategies motivate employees to deliver to the customers according to the promise of the organizations.

Organizational brand-building strategies act as drivers for creating organizational brand equity (Lin and Siu, 2020). It is a positive signal of organizations toward their employees when they engage them in the process of designing brand-building strategies (Lashley, 1999). When organizations take input from their employees, they indicate that their employees have worth to them. These types of initiatives by the organization could serve as determinants for the creation of EBBE. When organizations set some goals and strategies for brand building, they are trying to influence brand equity positively. The strategies build by organizations are standards for employees as by following them, they can assist the organization in the creation of brand equity. Vallaster and Lindgreen (2011) acknowledged that the role of the leader is also a considerable aspect of the brand-building process. The frontline employees have a considerable amount of effort into creating brand equity. Further, Quaratino and Mazzei (2018) added in vein and said that leaders act as the custodian of other employees in providing committed service on behalf of the organization. In addition, the leader can play a vital role in the creation process of organizational brand equity.

This study contributes to the literature on brand equity in seven ways. First, this study serves the literature on brand equity by highlighting the importance of brand equity for the sustainability of organizations. Second, this study adds some insight to the literature on organizational brand equity strategies. Based on the theory of motivation (Maslow, 1943), this study proposes that organizational brand equity strategies positively influence the employees and motivate them to create brand equity in organizations. These strategies are a positive signal for the creation of EBBE in the organizations. Third, based on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), this study assumes that organizational brand equity strategies are a positive signal of organizations for brand equity creation. Fourth, this study attempts to check the role of brand-oriented leadership in creating brand equity in an organization. Fifth, this study aims to find out the role of brand-oriented leadership in the building process of EBBE. The role of the leader is very critical in the overall brand management of the organization. That is why this study attempts to check the specific role of leaders in creating EBBE. Sixth, this study's findings also have some essential managerial implications. Seventh, this study serves the literature on brand equity by providing an empirical investigation of the building process of brand equity in organizations.

In addition, this study offers a framework for a better understanding of the brand equity creation process. For this purpose, this study proposed four different direct relationships and also mediation and moderation effects. The direct relationship of organizational brand-building strategies proposed with employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity. The direct relationships of employee-based brand equity and brand-oriented leadership are also proposed with employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity, respectively. The moderating role of brand-oriented leadership and the mediating role of employee-based brand equity are also considered in the proposed framework.

The remaining part of the present study is designed as follows: first, introduce the key constructs of the theoretical framework and review the literature for hypothesis development. Next, the methodology part of the paper is presented and the findings are discussed. Finally, this article is concluded with a discussion of the findings, future research directions, and limitations of the study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Organizational Brand Equity

Brands have been an important part of organizations' marketing strategies for hundreds of years (Feldwick, 1996). In addition, organizations placed their efforts and resources in different aspects of branding to maintain their sustainability because they realize the importance of branding to create brand equity. Shocker and Aaker (1993) define brand equity as a value-added activity of an organization to strengthen the relationship with stakeholders. Further, they acknowledged that this value addition activity could be considered from the perspective of product, trade, or customer. Feldwick (1996) shed further light on the concept of brand equity and said that organizations could measure their brand equities by gauging increments in cash flows from the perspective of the product. Further, the author elaborated on brand equity and said that this concept could be used in three different aspects. First, the concept of brand equity could be used as the value of a brand which is separate from other tangible and intangible assets. Second, brand equity could also be considered as the level of attachment that customers have with the brand. Third, the concept of brand equity could also be seen as the collection of thoughts and views of external stakeholders about the brand. Singh and Banerjee (2021) acknowledged that these three aspects are not independent as brand equity of organizations at all levels has an association with each other.

Prados-Peña and Del Barrio-García (2021) illuminated the importance of brand equity and considered it a valuable organizational asset in the literature. Further, they argue that "brand credibility and brand attitude" are two main antecedents of brand equity. Brand credibility is the level of honesty and transparency of a brand toward consumers (Singh and Banerjee, 2021). Further, they pointed out the significance of brand credibility and acknowledged that it is an important factor in long-term relationships between organizations and consumers. In addition, Prados-Peña and Del Barrio-García (2021) shed light on the importance of brand attitude and said that it could play a role as a driver for the creation process of organizational brand equity.

Aaker (1992) documented the importance of organizational brand equity and said that it is the value creation asset of an organization that can assist the firm in maintenance of sustainability in the market. Further, Faircloth et al. (2001) argue that brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand association are three important determinants of brand equity. Brand loyalty reflects when organizations engage customers through brand equity activities because they are trying to attain the loyalty of consumers (Shocker and Aaker, 1993). Brand awareness is also a consequence of brand equity activities of an organization as it reflects the recognition of consumers about the brand (Aaker, 1992). Faircloth et al. (2001) noticed that brand association is a sense of belonging of consumers with the brand. Further, they stated that brand association is also a very important determinant of brand equity and organization put their efforts into creating brand awareness by doing branding activities.

In this era of competition, organizations are keen to find out ways to cope with the dynamics of the market. The above-discussed literature on organizational-based brand equity sheds further light on the importance of brand equity for organizations. This study aims to extend the literature by providing an empirical investigation of organizational brand equity.

Employee-Based Brand Equity

Brand equity could be labeled as the fruitful consequence of brand-building activities of organizations (Berry, 2000). King and Grace (2010) highlighted the three important approaches to measure brand equity, including financial, customer, and employee-based brand equities. Wang (2010) defined the financial-based brand equity and said that it is the additional worth offered by a brand to a firm's economic value in the form of cash flows. According to Meng and Bari (2019) point of view, consumer-based brand equity is termed as the perceptions and feelings of consumers about the brand. In other words, this approach depicts how consumers think and behave about the brand. King and Grace (2009) shed further light on brand equity and define the EBBE as the brand value addition activity which takes place as a result of employees' efforts.

King and Grace (2010) noticed that the literature on brand equity generally considered the financial and customer approaches for measuring brand equity and ignores the third important perspective which is EBBE. However, in this era of competition, organizations have to consider the worth of EBBE-building activities (Wilden et al., 2006). Employees are an organization's assets because they have a considerable role brand-building activities of the organization (Poulis and Wisker, 2016). In addition, firms need the assistance of employees to deliver the promised value to customers. The role of human capital cannot be ignored in the brand equity creation process, as Erkmen (2018) revealed that the organization considered customer contact employees as the organization's internal customers. Brand knowledge of employees could act as a precursor for the creation process of EBBE (King and Grace, 2010). Further, Erkmen (2018) quantified employee brand knowledge as the foundation of the brand equity building process. In other words, employees with strong brand knowledge could perform more appropriately in delivering the expected brand promises.

Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) call attention to an important aspect of the brand equity building process and say that efficient knowledge dissemination is a valuable indication of brand equity cultivation. Therefore, it is the prime responsibility of the organization to give special attention to internal communication about the brand (Erkmen, 2018). In addition, effective internal communication efforts of an organization can pave the way for employees to feel psychological attachments to the organization. Scholars noticed that psychologically attached employees are more likely to engage in delivering organizational promised value to consumers (Poulis and Wisker, 2016; Fergnani, 2019). King and Grace (2010) acknowledged that employees' psychological attachment is a constructive sign toward the creation of EBBE.

King and So (2015) identified three important dimensions of EBBE including "brand-consistent behaviors, brand endorsement, and brand allegiance." Poulis and Wisker (2016) give arguments about these three dimensions and said that brand-consistent behavior is the extent of employees by which they behave in organizational identical ways. Further, they argue that brand endorsement is the employee's positive words of mouth about the brand while brand allegiance is the intention of the employee to remain a part of the organization for the long term.

Organizational Brand-Building Strategies

The ultimate goal of any organization is to build long-term relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Alreck and Settle, 1999). In this regard, organizations put their efforts into communicating the values of the brand to the creation of a competitive edge. However, Vallaster and Lindgreen (2011) revealed organization managers, employees, and consumers as three important actors in the brand-building process. Alreck and Settle (1999) further stated that organizations need an effective plan for brand-building activities because the comprehensive internal network is the base for successful organizational branding. King and Grace (2006) quantify these types of branding planning activities as organizational brand-building strategies. Further, they pointed out the importance of organizational brand-building strategies and said that they are playing the role of the "heart" of organizations in the equity creation process. In addition, it is stated that improved service quality, satisfied consumers, and brand loyalty could be some possible blessings in return for these activities (Quaratino and Mazzei, 2018). Scholars consider the organizational strategies as the most important component to frame the behaviors of employees in the brand-building process (Alreck and Settle, 1999; King and Grace, 2006; Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011).

Quaratino and Mazzei (2018) also highlighted the significance of organizational brand-building strategies and said that effective managerial practices are the first step in constructing the brand-consistent behaviors of employees. Foroudi (2020) acknowledged that organizations nowadays are trying to create a competitive advantage by utilizing corporate branding internationally. According to King and Grace (2009) point of view, four important aspects could be the base of successful organizational brand-building strategies including "information generation, knowledge dissemination, openness, and the 'H' factor." Further, they stated that information generated by conducting research enables organizations to assess crucial information about the needs and wants of employees' branding strategies. Knowledge dissemination allows organizations to transmit a framework to employees to create brand consisting behaviors (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020). Openness indicates two-way responsibility (between organization and employee) to create a climate that is considered to be positive for the brand-building process (King and Grace, 2009). In addition, the 'H' factor is concerned with the organization's responsibility to treat employees with respect and honor as the employees have an essential part in the brand-building process.

Brand-Oriented Leadership

The frontline employees always have a critical role in building an organizational brand image (Quaratino and Mazzei, 2018). They can put their efforts into building a positive perception of customers about the brand because these employees have direct interactions with customers. In this regard, Morhart et al. (2009) stated frontline employees as brand ambassadors who transform the organization's vision into reality. In addition, Terglav et al. (2016) point out that managers must ensure employees' commitment level for providing accurate service. For gaining expected outcomes, internal branding is a valuable effort to create brand equity. Terglav et al. (2016) point out that internal communication, training, meeting, and briefing are four important aspects of internal branding. Further, internal communication strengthens the psychological contracts between employees and organizations. The positive development of a psychological contract between both parties paves the way for reciprocity-based employment relationships (Bashir et al., 2021).

Muenjohn and Armstrong (2008) argue about the critical role of brand-oriented leadership and state that the performance of employees is highly correlated with the perception of employees about their leadership. Terglav et al. (2016) define brand-oriented leadership as the style in which they act as a role model to motivate employees to perform favorably in brand-building activities. In addition, brand-oriented leadership could draw a clear picture of brand cues in the mind of employees which in turn causes in the form of organizational expected outcomes. Successful leaders constantly and repeatedly express the importance of brand commitment and motivate employees to maintain brand promise.

Morhart et al. (2009) point out that the understanding of the creation process of brand equity could not be complete without seeking the importance of brand-oriented leadership. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) also acknowledged that leaders have a great part in building pro-organization behaviors of employees which in turn assist the organization in creating EBBE. Further, Muenjohn and Armstrong (2008) argued about brand-oriented leadership and said that transformational leadership could play a valuable role in aligning the employee's directions toward brand-building activities. Transformational leaders always put effort into inspiring the employees and making positive changes to achieve the organizational goals (Terglav et al., 2016). However, according to Morhart et al. (2009) point of view, the transactional leadership approach can also play a considerable role in the brand-building process. Furthermore, they give arguments in favor of this approach and said that transactional leadership could align the behavior of employees toward organizational brand equity. Lee et al. (2019) also commented on the importance of transformational leadership and transactional leadership approaches and said that both have a significant role in forming the psychological process of employees and can differently influence them to engage in brand-building efforts.

Hypotheses Development

Based on the literature, this study proposed a theoretical framework to frame the role of organizational brand-building

strategies in the formation of organizational brand equity and EBBE. With the support of signaling theory, this study assumes that the organizational brand-building strategies are a positive signal for the firm to create organizational brand equity. Prados-Peña and Del Barrio-García (2021) also point out the importance of organizational brand-building strategies for brand equity building. Based on the theory of motivation, this study proposes that organizational brand-building strategies motivate employees to act in firm expected ways to create EBBE. Organizational strategies for brand equity creation always come with a fruitful outcome in creating brand equity from the employees' perspectives (King and Grace, 2009). This study also tries to determine the role of brand-oriented leadership in creating EBBE and organizational brand equity. Boukis and Christodoulides (2020) revealed that frontline employees could assist the organizations favorably in building brand equity from the perspective of employees and organizations. Further, this study also attempts to check the moderating effect of brand-oriented leadership in the creation process of organizational brand equity and EBBE. This study also tries to investigate the mediating role of EBBE in the building of organizational brand-building strategy and organizational brand equity in brand equity building. For empirical investigation, this study developed the following hypotheses. Moreover, a conceptual framework based on the above literature is represented in **Figure 1**.

H1: Organizational brand building strategies positively influence employee-based brand equity.

H2: Organizational brand building strategies positively influence the organizational brand equity.

H3: Employee-based brand equity positively influences organizational brand equity.

H4: Employee-based brand equity mediates the positive relationship between organizational brand building strategy and organizational brand equity.

H5: Brand-oriented leadership positively influences employee-based brand equity.

H6: Brand-oriented leadership positively influences organizational brand equity.

H7: Brand-oriented leadership moderates the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity.

H8: Brand-oriented leadership moderates the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study collected data under a convenient sampling technique from the employees of different beverage companies in China. The author targeted companies that are famous among people as a brand. For this purpose, the author interviewed 50 MBA executive students. The author contacted the managers of the targeted companies and explained the purpose of being contacted. Most of the managers showed their consent, and the author personally visited their offices and met with them. At the author's request, managers created a targeted employee group on the WeChat application.

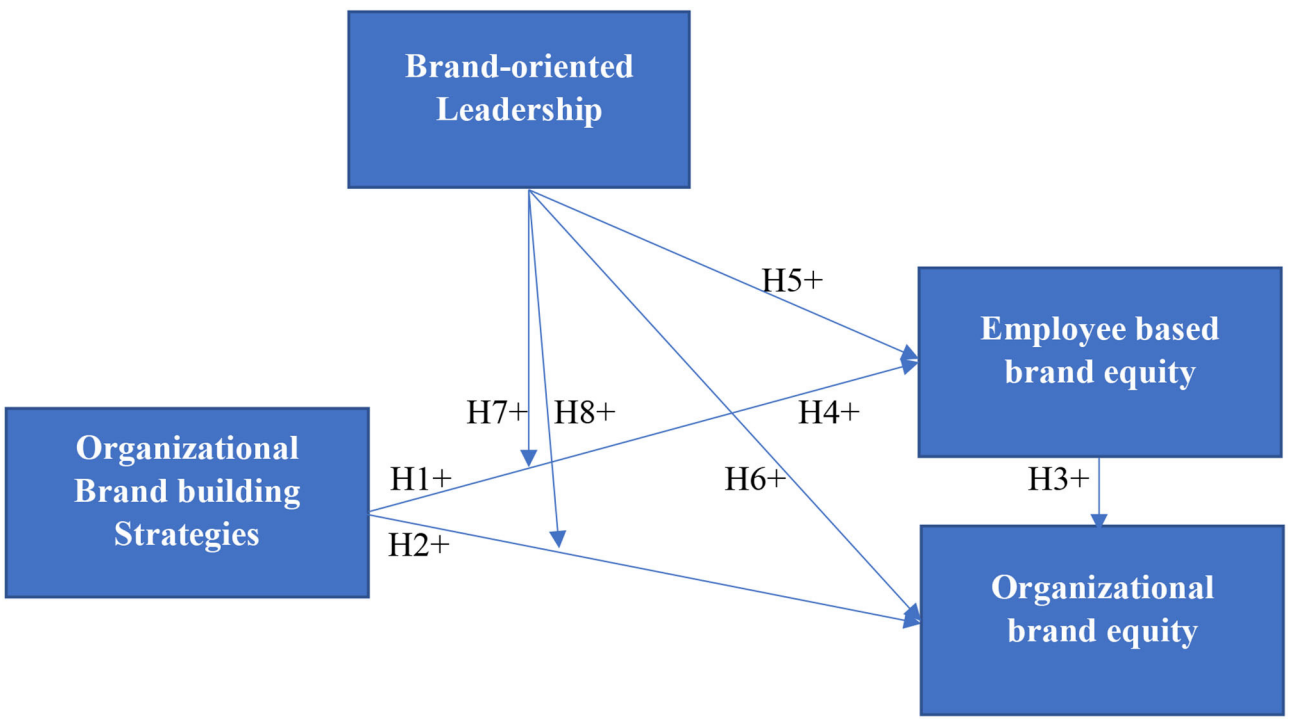

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

The questionnaires also included a cover letter in which employees were assured that their data would be kept anonymous and used only for academic purposes, and aggregated results would be revealed. This cover letter confident the employees so that employees freely filled out questionnaires.

The author followed previous researchers' guidance for gathering suitable sample sizes. According to their guidance, up to 400 sample sizes are considered appropriate (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970; MacCallum et al., 1999). So author fixed a benchmark of 400 questionnaires. The author distributed all the questionnaires in WeChat groups. This study applied a time lag data approach to reduce common method bias. Hence, all the questionnaires were developed based on a key question for participants' response identification. Thus, this study collected data in three waves with one-month gap in each wave. In the first wave, questionnaires related to IV (Organizational brand-building strategies) and demographics were distributed among 1,200 employees.

Out of 1,200, 789 respondents filled the questionnaires. After a one-month gap, the questionnaires related to DVs (Employee-based brand equity and organization brand equity) were distributed among these 789 employees. Out of 789, 565 respondents filled the questionnaire in the second wave. Moreover, after a further one-month gap, the author distributed moderator variable (brand-oriented leadership) questionnaires among 565 respondents. Out of 565, 488 respondents completed questionnaires. Based on the key questions, the author identified the same respondents in all turns and finalized questionnaires that were complete in all respect. In this way, the author found 488 complete questionnaires.

TABLE 1 | Demographic information.

Categories	Subcategories	Numbers	Percentage
Gender	Male	276	56.6
	Female	212	43.4
Age	20–28 years	112	23.0
	29–36 years	192	39.3
	37–45 years	119	24.4
	46 years or above	65	13.3
Education	Matric to Intermediate	43	8.8
	Bachelor	126	25.8
	Master	161	33.0
	Technical	158	32.4
Experience	<3 years	75	15.4
	4–7 years	126	25.8
	8–10 years	161	33.0
	11–15 years	96	19.7
	16 years onward	30	6.1

Measures

Participants' responses were measured through five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This study measured variables from previously used items. Organizational brand strategies were measured with the five-item scales. The five items were adapted from a previous study by Coleman, Chernatony, and Christodoulides (Coleman et al.,

TABLE 2 | Reliability and validity of the study constructs.

Construct	Item	Outer loadings	VIF	Alpha	roh-A	Composite reliability	AVE
OBBS	OBBS2	0.892	2.944	0.858	0.869	0.904	0.704
	OBBS3	0.878	2.799				
	OBBS4	0.827	2.011				
	OBBS5	0.751	1.589				
EBBE	EBBE1	0.856	2.306	0.884	0.893	0.92	0.742
	EBBE2	0.909	3.149				
	EBBE4	0.805	2.010				
	EBBE5	0.873	2.613				
OBE	OBE2	0.799	2.715	0.883	0.891	0.91	0.629
	OBE3	0.787	2.456				
	OBE4	0.796	2.674				
	OBE5	0.789	1.895				
	OBE6	0.828	2.463				
	OBE7	0.758	2.049				
BOL	BOL1	0.811	1.883	0.876	0.883	0.909	0.666
	BOL2	0.835	2.463				
	BOL3	0.832	2.454				
	BOL4	0.803	2.748				
	BOL5	0.800	2.650				

OBBS, organizational brand-building strategies; EBBE, employee-based brand building; OBE, organizational brand equity; BOL, brand-oriented leader.

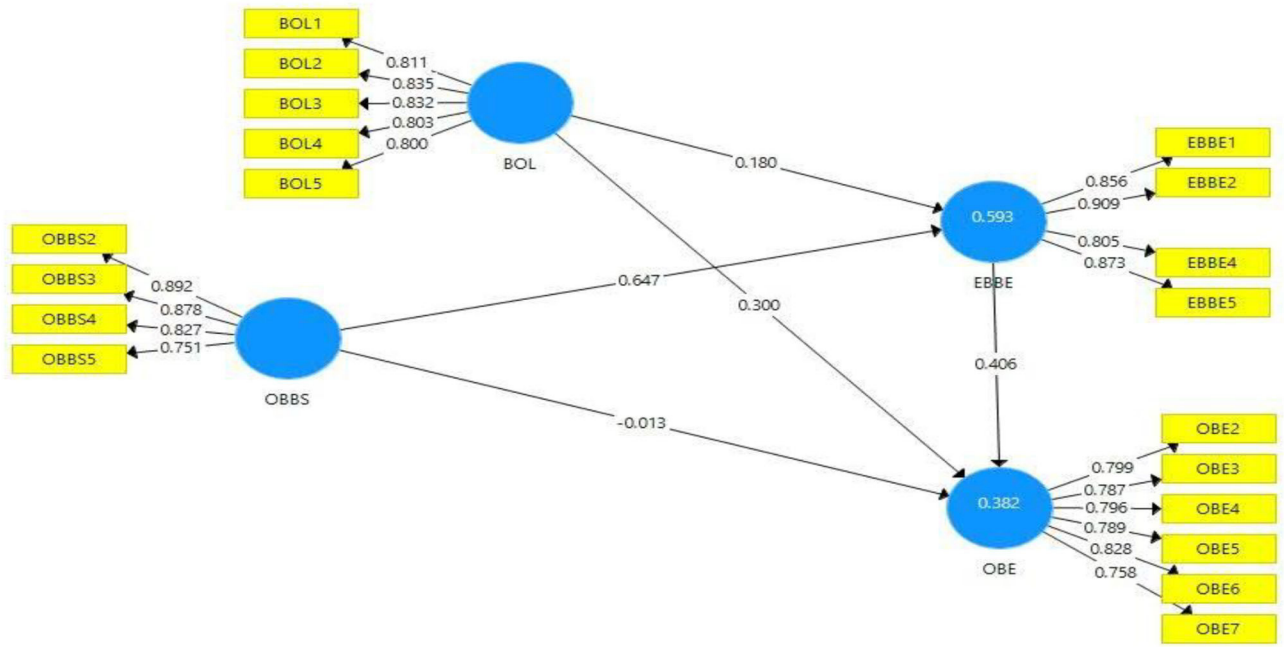

FIGURE 2 | Path estimates.

2011). A sample item includes "Our organization responds to our clients' brand identification needs." The employee-based brand equity variable was measured by five items adapted from Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010), also validated by Boukis and Christodoulides (2020). A sample item includes "I always consider the impact on the company's brand when I make decisions." Organizational brand equity was measured with seven items adapted from Srivastava (2009). A sample item includes "Does it offer advantages over the existing competitive products." The brand-oriented leadership was measured with five items scale adapted from Boukis and Christodoulides (2020). A sample item includes "My line manager behaves consistently with the brand values, even when he is not controlled for doing so."

Demographics Information

Table 1 explains the demographic information of the respondents. Out of 488 participants, 276 were male, and 212 were female. A total of 112 participants were up to 28 years old, 192 participants were up to 36 years, 119 participants were up to 45 years old, and 65 participants were up to 46 or more than 46 years old. A total of 43 participants have education matric to intermediate, 126 participants have bachelor's education, 161 participants have master's education, and 158 have technical education. A total of 75 participants have <3 years of experience, 126 participants have experience of more than 3 and up to 7 years, and 161 responded have 8–10 years of experience. Ninety-six participants have 11–15 years of experience, and 30 participants have more than 15 years of experience.

RESULTS

This study analyzed data through structural equation modeling (SEM), and for this purpose, partial least square (PLS) SEM was used instead of covariance-based techniques such as AMOS (Nawaz et al., 2022). The PLS-SEM is selected because it is suitable for both studies, that is, confirmatory and exploratory (Avotra et al., 2021). Structural equation modeling consists of covariance-based (CB-SEM) and PLS-SEM techniques (Yingfei et al., 2021). Both approaches have differences, such as the covariance-based is used to acknowledge/refuse the theories. On the contrary, PLS-SEM offers extensions and advances in theories (Hair et al., 2016). Smart PLS 3.3 was used to measure the data. It measured data in two parts: measurement and structural path. Smart PLS is appropriate for complex or even small sample size data analysis.

Reliability and validity of the model are a part of measurement models. This study examined the model's reliability with Cronbach alpha, roh-A, composite reliability, and average variance extract and the model's validity with convergent and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014, 2016). This study models all variables' reliabilities and are shown in **Table 2**. First, according to the threshold of Cronbach alpha, it should be >0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). This study model variable Cronbach alpha values are larger than 0.70. For instance, the values of IV (organizational brand building), DVs (employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity), and moderators (brand-oriented leadership) are 0.858, 0.884, 0.883, and 0.876, respectively. These values are according to the given Cronbach alpha threshold. Thus, all values are accepted. Second, the roh-A values of all variables are according to the threshold. Third, model

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker-1981 Criteria).

Constructs	BOL	EBBE	OBBS	OBE
BOL	**0.816**			
EBBE	0.573	**0.862**		
OBBS	0.606	0.757	**0.839**	
OBE	0.525	0.568	0.477	**0.793**

OBBS, organizational brand-building strategies; EBBE, employee-based brand building; OBE, organizational brand equity; BOL, brand-oriented leader.

TABLE 4 | Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Constructs	BOL	EBBE	OBBS	OBE
BOL	–	–	–	–
EBBE	0.640	–	–	–
OBBS	0.693	0.854	–	–
OBE	0.586	0.622	0.546	–

OBBS, organizational brand-building strategies; EBBE, employee-based brand building; OBE, organizational brand equity; BOL, brand-oriented leader.

variables' composite reliability (CR) and average variance extract (AVE) are also examined. The acceptable values of variables for composite reliability are also >0.7, and the average variance extract is >0.5. This study model variable values are within the limit of the threshold.

Moreover, all variables' outer loadings were also checked and are presented in **Table 2**. A value >0.6 is considered appropriate for items' outer loadings (**Figure 2**). All variables items are larger than 0.6 instead three items and thus removed; for instance, one item of IV (organizational brand-building strategies) OBBS1 was removed, and two items of DVs (employee-based brand equity) EBBE3 and (organizational-based equity) OBE1 were removed. These items were removed due to weaker or poor loadings and for the better output of the results.

This study also assessed the collinearity issue through the variance inflation factor (VIF). Hair et al. (2014) acknowledged that VIF values below 0.5 are considered acceptable. **Table 2** shows that the VIF values of this study model inner constructs are between the range of 1.589 and 2.944. It shows that all items' VIF values are according to the threshold. Thus, no collinearity issue was identified in this study research model.

The R^2 value above 0.25 and up to 0.5 shows a moderate model strength in primary data. This study models DVs such as employee-based brand equity ($R^2 = 0.593$) and organizational brand equity ($R^2 = 0.382$) R^2 values showed moderate strength in the model (Hair et al., 2016). Moreover, the Q^2 values of all models' latent constructs are higher than the zero. It is also a sign of significance model.

The discriminant validity of this study was assessed through the Fornell–Larcker criterion and heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) (Xiaolong et al., 2021). The Fornell–Larcker criterion confirms discriminant validity by taking the square root of all model variables' average variance extract values (Fornell and Larcker, 2016; Hair et al., 2016). **Table 3** presents all variables' discriminant validity based on the Fornell–Larcker criterion. This table shows that the model discriminant validity is achieved as the first values of all variables in each column show the highest values compared to their below values (Fornell and Larcker, 2016; Hair et al., 2016).

According to the HTMT ration criterion, all variables' values <0.85 are considered appropriate. However, HTMT values up to 0.90 are also acceptable (Hair et al., 2016). **Table 4** shows that all the values of this study model are according to the given standard as below 0.85 and up to 0.90. These outcomes revealed that discriminant validity is achieved in this study model.

Hypotheses Testing

This study applied a bootstrapping method with 5,000 samples for statistical verification of the model hypotheses (Hair et al., 2014, 2016). This study considered t and p values to reject and accept the hypotheses (Hair et al., 2014). **Table 5** explains the outcomes of the H1 relationship that proposed the positive impact of organizational brand-building strategies on employee-based brand equity, and t and p values confirm this proposition's acceptability ($t = 10.825$, $P = 0.000$). Thus, the H1 is accepted. Moreover, the beta value of this hypothesis showed that one unit change in organizational brand-building strategies would bring a 0.598 change in employee-based brand equity. Second, H2 predicted the positive impact of organizational brand-building strategies on employee-based brand equity. The t and p values ($t = 0.028$, $p = 0.978$) of H2 showed insignificant outcomes. Hence, H2 is rejected. It confirmed that organizational brand-building strategies do not positively influence the employee-based brand equity. Third, the H3 proposed that the employee-based brand equity positively impacted on organizational brand equity and **Table 6** shows significant outcomes as t and p values showed acceptability ($t = 5.319$, $p = 0.000$). Thus, H3 is accepted. The beta value of H3 revealed that one unit change in employee-based brand equity would bring 0.409 unit changes in organizational-based equity. H5 proposed the positive influence of brand-oriented leadership on employee-based brand equity. The acceptable range for this proposition's t and p values is ($t = 3.799$, $p = 0.000$). Thus, H5 is accepted. The beta value showed that one unit change in brand-oriented leadership would hold 0.171 employee-based brand equity changes. H6 also proposed the direct impact of brand-oriented leadership on organizational equity. The t and p values of H6 showed significant outcomes ($t = 4.510$, $p = 0.000$). Hence, H6 is also accepted. According to the path coefficient value of H6, the one unit change in brand-oriented leadership will lead to 0.303 unit changes in organizational brand equity.

Table 5 also shows the positive outcomes of the indirect proposition of H4 ($t = 4.680$, $p = 0.000$). As predicted, organizational brand-building strategies positively influence the employee-based brand-building equity, and in turn, employee-based brand building positively influences the organizational

TABLE 5 | Hypotheses testing.

	Coefficient (Beta)	S.D	*t*	*p*	Status	
Hypotheses						
H1	OBBS → EBBE	0.598	0.055	10.825	0.000	Supported
H2	OBBS → OBE	0.002	0.065	0.028	0.978	Not Supported
H3	EBBE → OBE	0.409	0.077	5.319	0.000	Supported
H5	BOL → EBBE	0.171	0.045	3.799	0.000	Supported
H6	BOL → OBE	0.303	0.067	4.510	0.000	Supported
Mediation Hypotheses						
H4	OBBS → EBBE → OBE	0.245	0.052	4.680	0.000	Supported
Moderation Hypotheses						
H7	OBBS * BOL → EBBS	−0.055	0.028	1.992	0.046	Supported
H8	OBBS * BOL → OBS	0.019	0.044	0.426	0.670	Not Supported

OBBS, organizational brand-building strategies; EBBE, employee-based brand building; OBE, organizational brand equity; BOL, brand-oriented leader.

brand equity. It shows that employee-based brand equity positively mediates the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity. Thus, H4 is accepted.

Moreover, H7 predicted the moderation effect of brand-oriented leadership between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity. According to the t and p values of H7 ($t = 1.992$, $p = 0.046$), brand-oriented leadership has negatively moderated the relationship between brand-oriented leadership and employee-based brand equity. It shows that brand-oriented leadership weakens the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity. Thus, H7 is accepted. Similarly, H8 also predicted a moderation effect of brand-oriented leadership between the association of organizational-based brand strategies and organizational brand equity but t and p values ($t = 0.426$, $p = 0.670$) showed insignificant outcomes. It shows that brand-oriented leadership did not moderate the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity. Thus, H8 is rejected.

DISCUSSION

Branding is considered an essential tool to compete in today's dynamic market (Huang and Tsai, 2013). In this turbulent environment, organizations put their efforts into finding ways to build brand equity. In this regard, organizational strategies play a key role in the brand-building process of firms (Ayrom and Tumer, 2021). In addition, scholars also acknowledged that employees also have a considerable role in the building process of brand equity (Boukis and Christodoulides, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). With the support of signaling theory and theory of motivation, this study attempts to check the role of organizational strategies in the creation of organizational equity as well as EBBE. Further, this study is also trying to determine the moderating role of brand-oriented leadership between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational equity and EBBE, respectively. This study revealed that organizational brand-building strategies are significant signals for EBBE and organizational brand equity. This study found a positive direct relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand-building strategies such as brand-building strategies enhance firms' values and reputation, which further enhance employees' trust, commitment, and brand credibility (Glynn, 2012). This study did not find a positive direct relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity. The negative results showed that organizations might not apply suitable strategies for market positioning or maybe they have poor decision-making regarding brand-building strategies (Thed and Fadzill, 2018). This study also examined the mediating role of employee-based brand equity between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity. The outcomes of this study revealed that employee-based brand equity positively mediated this relationship (**Table 5**). The outcomes suggest that organizational brand-building strategies may not directly influence organizational brand equity but can influence through the mediation of employee-based brand equity. Thus, organizations need to focus on building employee-based brand equity. Through building internal and external endeavor processes, brand-oriented companies can develop healthy brand awareness, reputation, and trustworthiness with organizational brand among employees (Huang and Tsai, 2013).

Moreover, this study also checked the direct effect of brand-oriented leadership on employee-based brand equity. The outcomes show that brand-oriented leadership positively influences employee-based brand equity. Second, this study examined brand-oriented leadership's direct effect on organizational brand equity. The results revealed that brand-oriented leadership positively influences organizational brand equity. Hence, through brand-oriented leadership, organizations can apply internal brand management and brand communications that enhance employee brand commitment and engagement (Afshardoost et al., 2021).

Furthermore, this study also assessed brand-oriented leadership as a moderator in the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity. The outcomes showed that brand-oriented

TABLE 6 | Direct, indirect, and total path estimates.

	Beta	SD	*t*	*p*
Direct path				
OBBS → EBBE	0.598	0.055	10.825	**0.000**
OBBS → OBE	0.002	0.065	0.028	**0.978**
EBBE → OBE	0.409	0.077	5.319	**0.000**
BOL → EBBE	0.171	0.045	3.799	**0.000**
BOL → OBE	0.303	0.067	4.510	**0.000**
Indirect path				
OBBS → EBBE → OBE	0.245	0.052	4.680	**0.000**
BOL → EBBE → OBE	0.070	0.022	3.238	**0.001**
Total path				
OBBS → EBBE	0.598	0.055	10.825	**0.000**
OBBS → OBE	0.247	0.063	3.926	**0.000**
BOL → EBBE	0.171	0.045	3.799	**0.000**
BOL → OBE	0.373	0.062	6.023	**0.000**

OBBS, organizational brand-building strategies; EBBE, employee-based brand building; OBE, organizational brand equity; BOL, brand-oriented leader.

leadership reduces the strength of organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity relationships. Second, this study assessed the moderator role of brand-oriented leadership in the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity. This study results showed that brand-oriented leadership does not moderate the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity.

Discussion on Unexpected Moderating Results

The moderating effects of brand-oriented leadership on the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity are unexpected. Brand-oriented leadership should positively impact as a moderator between organizational brand-oriented leadership and employee-based brand equity (Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021). Second, it is also unexpected that brand-oriented leadership does not moderate the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity. The author tried to know the consequences of brand-oriented leadership's unexpected moderation results. The author interviewed brand-oriented leaders. The outcomes of the interviews revealed that most of the brand-oriented leaders were not involved in building organizational brand strategies. The organization's upper-level management prepared the strategies without consulting their brand-oriented leaders. In this regard, the organizations did not utilize the capabilities of their leaders, and as a consequence, leaders were not happy with the organizational brand-building strategies. Hence, it was the prime cause of contradictions between organizational brand-building strategies and brand-oriented leaders. Thus, organizations should make rational decisions and wise policies to resolve these contradictions for smoothness in building organizational brand equity (Zhao et al., 2019).

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has many theoretical and practical implications. First, theoretically, this study extends the literature on organizational brand-building strategies. Previous studies did not consider organizational brand-building strategies to build employee and organizational brand equity (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2011; Quaratino and Mazzei, 2018). With the support of signaling theory and theory of motivation, this study took the initiative and extended the literature on the role of organizational brand-building strategies in building brand equity from the employee and organizational perspective. Second, this study examined the mediating role of employee-based brand equity between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational-based brand equity. Hence, this study extended the literature on employee-based brand equity by checking its role as a mediator. Third, this study also extended the literature on brand-oriented leadership as brand-oriented leadership positively influences employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity. This study also extends the literature on brand-oriented leadership as a moderator between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity. Practically, this study guides the managers that brand-oriented organizations must have differentiation product capabilities that strategically align with organizational brand goals to build employee-based brand equity and ultimately result in organizational brand equity (Huang and Tsai, 2013).

Moreover, brand-oriented leadership plays a crucial role in positively impacting employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity. This study suggests that top management must coordinate with brand-oriented leadership while building organizational brand strategies for smooth functioning in organizations.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study serves the literature in many different ways, but this study also has some limitations. First, this study collected data from different employees working in beverage companies in China in three waves. Future research can conduct a longitudinal study by enlarging the sample size to verify our study results. Second, future research may collect data from other industries by adopting this study model to strengthen the results of this study. Third, this study examined brand-oriented leadership as moderating construct between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based and organizational brand equity. Future research may consider other moderators like the organizational culture. This study did not check the mediating effect between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity relationships. Future research can also propose this relationship with the support of mediators. Moreover, this examined brand-oriented leadership's direct effect on employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity and found positive outcomes. Future research can confirm this relationship with the support of mediators and moderators.

Finally, this study was conducted in China. A similar study could be conducted in other developing countries or developed countries to strengthen and ensure the results.

CONCLUSION

In this era of competition, organizations are now well aware of brand equity importance from the organizational and employees' perspectives. Firms are serving their efforts and resources to maintain their sustainability by creating brand equity. This study attempts to examine the role of organizational brand-building strategies on employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity. The role of leadership in creating brand equity is also worthwhile because frontline employees are considered in the literature as ambassadors of the brand. This study also considers the role of brand-oriented leadership in the theoretical model for empirical investigation. This study's findings depict that organizational brand-building strategies positively influence employee-based brand equity, but their significant influence on organizational brand equity was not found. This study also examined the mediating role of employee-based brand equity in the relationship between organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity and found that employee-based brand equity positively mediates this relationship. This study also assessed brand-oriented leadership's direct relationship with employee-based brand equity and organizational brand equity and discovered its positive effects. Moreover, this study also evaluated brand-oriented leadership as a moderator between organizational brand-building strategies and employee-based brand equity and found that brand-oriented leadership negatively moderates this relationship. Second, this study also considered brand-oriented leadership as a moderator between the association of organizational brand-building strategies and organizational brand equity; however, outcomes revealed that brand-oriented leadership does not moderate this relationship.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Tianjin Vocational Institute, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

ZW has conceptualized the concept, collected data, and wrote the draft.

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How Behavioral Branding Affects Brand Equity

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Maintaining and increasing brand equity is the top priority for most brand managers. This includes not only the areas of public relations and advertising, but also the way in which sales staff communicates regarding the brand. According to behavioral branding, the brand should be strengthened by the brand fit of the employees. To date, research and practice have developed more intuitive and heuristic methods for evaluating employee behavior and its impact on the brand. In this article, behavior will be operationalized and measured by personality and sales encounter experience. The method is based on Heider's balance theory explaining the occurrence of cognitive dissonance in case of unbalanced states in triads, here the brand, the customer, and the salesperson. Findings show how discrepancies in personal behavior led to discrepancies in brand equities before and after the sales encounter.

Keywords: brand personality, salesperson's personality, brand equity, behavioral branding, sales encounter

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INTRODUCTION

Sales employees are involved in sales encounters with their clients. These encounters and the resulting relationships have been the subject of numerous studies (Bitner, 1990; Babin et al., 1999; Piercy et al., 2001; Darian et al., 2005; Bäckström and Johansson, 2006; Jamal and Adelowore, 2008). The relationship between the employees and the brand, the so-called behavioral branding, is of particular importance (Manarioti and Kaufmann, 2014). Behavioral branding is defined as employee behavior resulting in an interaction with customers in order to increase their positive attitude toward the brand (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). Consequently, employees' behavior is expected to be brand consistent (Henkel et al., 2007). The aim is to avoid cognitive dissonance regarding how consumers experience the brand (Cummings and Venkatesan, 1976; Powers and Jack, 2013). Cognitive dissonance can be created after being confronted with conflicting information (Oshikawa, 1969). This discrepant impression can occur through the inappropriate behavior of employees representing the brand. The information they provide is not on-brand; inevitably, this will lead to clients having a less positive opinion about the brand and its equity.

In the marketing literature, brand equity is a pivotal construct and has important implications for brand management (Farquhar, 1989; Aaker and Keller, 1990; Barwise, 1993; Keller, 2003). The so-called Consumer-based Brand Equity (CBBE) has been defined as the incremental utility of a branded product in comparison to its unbranded counterpart (Leuthesser, 1988; Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993, 2003). Customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and the brand's ability to command a markup are positively influenced by high brand equity (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Park and Srinivasan, 1994).

Brand personality is one of the drivers of CBBE (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1997), p. 347 defined brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand." Because consumers perceive brands as extensions of themselves, they associate human personality traits with brands (Belk, 1988). Human personality has been described in many ways, the most prominent of which is the "Big Five" factor structure (Goldberg, 1990; John and Srivastava, 1999). A similar factor structure can be found in Aaker's (1997) dimensions of brand personality. What could be more obvious than measuring the quality of behavioral branding by examining the extent to which the employee's behavior, which expresses his or her personality during a sales encounter, is sending out contradictory signals about the brand's personality?

This article discusses the results of an empirical study with 48 different sales encounters by nine employees for six brands. In doing so, it explains the mechanism of how a brand ambassador's behavior influences consumers' reception of the brand and how this can affect brand equity. While the effects of behavioral branding might be understood as a rather intuitive fit between the employee and the brand, the terms, personality and equity, are suitable to operationalize behavioral branding mechanisms. In addition to making a theoretical contribution to the field, this article provides helpful advice for practitioners.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. The next section provides a theoretical overview of the topic and presents the four hypotheses formulated for this empirical study. Then, the study's method and results are presented. In the final section of this article, the study's conclusions are presented and discussed.

THE LINK BETWEEN BEHAVIORAL BRANDING AND BRAND EQUITY

Haider's (1958) balance theory explains how communication influences cognition. The balance theory was developed by Heider (1958) using triads. Triads consist of a person P, a second person O and an object X. Attitudes or factual logical relationships can exist between them. These relationships can be positive or negative in nature. The triad in **Figure 1** represents a possible example: P likes pizza (P + X), P is friends with pizza maker O (P + O), O makes the best pizza in town (O + X). In this case, all relationships are positive.

The triads are either in a balanced or in an unbalanced state. The triad in **Figure 1** is in balanced. All relationships are positive.

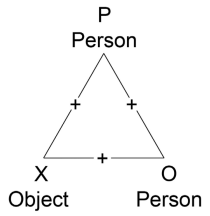

FIGURE 1 | Balanced triad.

In total there exist $2^3 = 8$ triads with different combinations of signs. The status of the triad can be derived from the product of the signs of the individual dyads. If it is positive, the triad is balanced, if it is negative (e.g., if there are two positive and one negative relationship) the triad is unbalanced.

The triads can be used to illustrate the balanced and imbalanced states within a sales process. P becomes the customer, O the salesperson, and X the brand as an object. The interrelationships are P ⇔ X (Consumer's Attitude toward the brand), P ⇔ O (salesperson's on-brand behavior during the sales process), and O ⇔ X (employee's attitude toward the brand). A successful sales process should strive for the one out of the eight possible triads with exclusively positive relationships.

Heider, 1958, p. 176 says that "the concept of a balanced state designates a situation in which the perceived units and the experienced sentiments co-exist without stress." An unbalanced state produces psychological tension within an individual which causes the so-called cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) where people may feel surprise, dread, guilt, anger, or embarrassment. Due to the negative effects of cognitive dissonance consumer loyalty decreases, negative word-of-mouth increases, the attitude toward the brand is deteriorating and a loss of trust and a subsequent erosion of the brand will follow (Oshikawa, 1969; Cummings and Venkatesan, 1976; Henkel et al., 2007; Bolia et al., 2021). Brand loyalty, brand trust, positive word-of-mouth as positive attitudes toward the brand are all part of brand equity (Keller, 1993, 2009; Brady et al., 2008). Thus, cognitive dissonance induced by an imbalanced state due to non-adequate behavior decimates brand equity. This might be the case when the customer's attitude toward the brands is positive and also the salesperson's attitude toward the brand is positive, however, the salesperson's behavior does not fit to the brand. As an example, this might be the case when a customer likes a Ferrari car and also the salesperson likes Ferrari, however, the salesperson is unable to demonstrate the car because he or she has no driving license. This fairly simple example shows how dissonance can occur and may subsequently damage the brand. On the other hand, positive behavioral branding increases brand equity.

First and foremost, humans are persons. The derivation of the word, person, seems to be controversial. Some scholars assign it to the Latin word, *persona*, which means mask or character. Persona has also been used to refer to the "sounding through" (*personare* = to sound through) of an actor's voice through his mask. A person's behavior exhibits his or her individual characteristics, which are called his/her "personality." An individual's personality is mostly stable over time and may "sound through" even without engaging in an activity. Thus, it is only one part of human behavior. The other part of human behavior is the way in which a person communicates with words or actions, such as occurs during a sales encounter. To evaluate a salesperson's behavior, both the salesperson's personality and his/her performance in the context of a sales encounter will be analyzed.

Since masculinity and femininity as human personality traits are relevant to brands as well as to people (Aaker, 1997; Grohmann, 2009), the personality of a salesperson can be measured using brand gender scales, as proposed and verified

TABLE 1 | (A) Brand personalities before the sales encounter (5-point Likert scale).

Brand	*N*	Adventurous	Aggressive	Brave	Daring	Dominant	Sturdy	Masculine brand personality (MBP)	Expresses tender feelings	Fragile	Graceful	Sensitive	Sweet	Tender	Feminine brand personality (FBP)
NIVEA	238	3.02	2.66	2.97	3.16	2.96	3.48	3.04	3.34	2.71	3.21	3.36	3.29	3.52	3.24
C&A	238	2.91	2.61	2.90	2.95	2.71	3.24	2.89	2.76	2.62	2.94	2.84	3.01	3.05	2.87
CANON	247	3.18	2.76	3.08	3.19	3.02	3.35	3.08	2.74	2.69	3.00	2.92	2.93	3.00	2.87
VW	262	3.15	2.91	3.15	3.20	3.17	3.45	3.17	2.68	2.65	3.06	2.77	2.91	2.88	2.83
LUFTHANSA	250	3.25	2.87	3.10	3.18	3.16	3.29	3.13	2.76	2.73	3.09	2.92	2.97	2.93	2.90
SPARKASSE	267	2.70	2.70	2.86	2.95	2.97	3.30	2.92	2.53	2.60	2.68	2.75	2.73	2.72	2.66
Total	1502	3.03	2.75	3.01	3.11	3.00	3.35	3.04	2.79	2.66	2.99	2.92	2.97	3.01	2.89

(B) Brand equities before the sales encounter (7-point Likert scale).

Brand	*N*	Not loyal – very loyal	Negative attitude – positive attitude	Negative image – positive image	Low quality – high quality	No willingness – high willingness to pay more	Brand equity
NIVEA	238	5.07	5.37	5.57	5.46	4.44	5.19
C&A	238	4.26	4.72	4.72	4.71	3.59	4.40
CANON	247	4.51	4.83	5.05	5.13	4.36	4.77
VW	262	4.48	4.74	4.69	5.04	4.03	4.59
LUFTHANSA	250	4.45	4.79	4.95	5.13	4.20	4.70
SPARKASSE	267	4.55	4.60	4.68	4.74	3.59	4.44
Total	1502	4.55	4.83	4.93	5.03	4.03	4.67

TABLE 2 | Average ratings for the visual brand fit of nine employees (highest rating = 9).

Employee	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Female				Male				
NIVEA	6.22	7.37	6.56	6.17	3.09	3.16	3.63	5.39	4.66
C&A	6.40	7.21	6.33	5.66	3.47	3.73	4.07	5.19	4.56
CANON	5.07	5.79	5.37	5.28	4.13	4.70	5.20	6.91	4.73
VW	4.34	4.96	4.53	5.02	5.71	5.09	6.27	6.99	4.83
LUFTHANSA	4.90	6.04	4.99	5.19	4.99	4.10	5.24	6.59	4.29
SPARKASSE	5.44	5.40	4.73	5.81	5.13	4.23	5.27	6.19	4.87

by Grohmann (2009). Previous research has demonstrated that the stronger the brand gender attributes, the stronger the brand equity (Lieven et al., 2014, 2015; Tilburg et al., 2015; Lieven and Hildebrand, 2016). Thus, the study tested the following hypothesis:

> H1: The stronger the gender dimensions of brand personality, the stronger the brand's equity.

Similarly, a salesperson's personality measured by gender dimensions strengthens the fit to the brand and increases its equity; thus:

> H2: The more the employee's personality outperforms (underperforms) a brand's personality, the more brand equity is strengthened (weakened).

In addition to these personality traits, the sales encounter experience will affect brand equity; thus:

> H3: The more (less) adequate a sales encounter, the more brand equity is strengthened (weakened).

It could be argued that the impression of the sales encounter is essential to the attitude toward the brand, so personality is irrelevant. Here, it is also suspected that the sales encounter plays a more important role, because personality is expressed during the encounter. This is done by mediating the personality through the sales encounter, thus:

> H4: The effect of the difference between the salesperson's personality and the brand personality is mediated by the experience of the sales encounter.

These hypotheses were tested in two subsequent surveys.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

Methods

This study analyzed the personalities of employees during a sales encounter as a result of their behavioral branding to determine if their personalities matched the brand personalities and whether any discrepancies in personalities cause a change in brand equity. Toward that end, Grohmann's (2009) gender dimensions of brand personality was applied. This scale has been verified several times and it was found to be valid for both brands and humans, reproducible and invariant across different countries and cultures (Grohmann, 2009; Lieven et al., 2014; Tilburg et al., 2015; Lieven and Hildebrand, 2016; Lieven, 2018). The results showed that strong brand gender increases brand equity. Brand equity was measured according to Brady et al. (2008). This brand equity scale was found to be sufficiently reliable (α = 0.86, Voorhees et al., 2006; α = 0.84, Brady et al., 2008) and valid [average variance extracted (AVE) = 0.55, Voorhees et al., 2006].

However, a crucial problem occurs with the type of analysis described above. In this study, brand equities have to be assessed twice, once before the sales encounter and once after. In case, this is done by the same survey participant this could result in common methods bias or source bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Scores for brand equity before the sales encounter could bias the equity scores stated after the encounter. Consequently, the first assessment of brand equity and the brand gender personality were moved to a separate survey.

Thus, the ratings for the employees' personality after a sales encounter and the brand equity ratings were assessed in a second survey. Thereafter, the brand equity ratings and the employee ratings were compared before and after the encounter and the brand equity ratings were also compared before and after the encounter.

The surveys were conducted online in Germany. The participants were invited to take the online surveys via email; the participants were chosen by an international service provider for online research. Participants were selected according to the rule that the entire sample should follow Germany's gender and age distribution as closely as possible.

Study 1: Brand Personality and Brand Equity Before the Sales Encounter

Six well-known brands in Germany were presented to the survey participants: NIVEA (cosmetics), C&A (chain of clothing stores), Canon (cameras), VW (automobile), LUFTHANSA (airline), and SPARKASSE (savings bank). These represent a variety of brands with tangible and non-tangible products and services. Three of the six brands were chosen randomly for each respondent. First, Grohmann's (2009) 12 personality items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = does not apply at all to 5 = does fully apply. Thereafter, the five equity scores (Brady et al., 2008) were rated by the participants on a 7-point Likert scale using the semantic differential of the respective item. As another *a priori* measure, the visual brand fit of nine salespersons

TABLE 3 | Brand equities before and after 48 sales encounters.

Encounter	*N*	Brand	Sales person	Visual brand Fit	Masculine brand personality	Feminine brand personality	Brand equity before sales encounter	Masculine employee personality	Feminine employee personality	Encounter experience	Brand equity after sales encounter	Personality difference	Difference in brand equity
1	346	NIVEA	1	6.22	3.04	3.24	5.18	2.91	3.05	4.84	4.78	−0.32	−0.41
2	322	NIVEA	1	6.22	3.04	3.24	5.18	3.00	2.42	3.65	4.11	−0.86	−1.07
3	300	NIVEA	2	7.37	3.04	3.24	5.18	2.85	3.13	5.02	4.79	−0.30	−0.39
4	338	NIVEA	2	7.37	3.04	3.24	5.18	2.89	3.11	5.12	4.93	−0.28	−0.25
5	284	NIVEA	4	6.17	3.04	3.24	5.18	3.07	2.70	4.45	4.50	−0.51	−0.69
6	349	NIVEA	4	6.17	3.04	3.24	5.18	3.02	2.42	3.36	3.97	−0.83	−1.22
7	293	NIVEA	6	3.16	3.04	3.24	5.18	3.03	2.64	4.07	4.41	−0.61	−0.77
8	309	NIVEA	6	3.16	3.04	3.24	5.18	3.00	2.33	3.21	3.98	−0.95	−1.20
9	337	C&A	2	7.21	2.89	2.87	4.40	2.84	3.01	5.07	4.59	0.10	0.19
10	311	C&A	1	6.40	2.89	2.87	4.40	2.92	2.43	3.52	3.46	−0.41	−0.94
11	323	C&A	4	5.66	2.89	2.87	4.40	3.03	2.83	4.73	4.44	0.11	0.04
12	312	C&A	6	3.73	2.89	2.87	4.40	3.03	2.35	3.43	3.65	−0.38	−0.75
13	329	C&A	9	4.56	2.89	2.87	4.40	2.80	3.04	4.84	4.52	0.08	0.12
14	303	C&A	7	4.07	2.89	2.87	4.40	2.68	2.17	3.00	3.28	−0.91	−1.12
15	318	CANON	2	5.79	3.10	2.88	4.78	2.89	3.01	5.03	4.75	−0.08	−0.02
16	306	CANON	2	5.79	3.10	2.88	4.78	2.90	3.06	5.18	4.84	−0.01	0.06
17	318	CANON	4	5.28	3.10	2.88	4.78	2.99	2.94	5.07	4.84	−0.05	0.07
18	311	CANON	6	4.70	3.10	2.88	4.78	2.98	2.49	4.01	4.24	−0.51	−0.54
19	315	CANON	7	5.20	3.10	2.88	4.78	2.91	2.88	5.05	4.85	−0.18	0.07
20	311	CANON	8	6.91	3.10	2.88	4.78	2.96	2.76	4.78	4.67	−0.26	−0.10
21	328	CANON	9	4.73	3.10	2.88	4.78	2.81	2.93	5.00	4.79	−0.24	0.02
22	325	VW	1	4.34	3.17	2.83	4.60	3.03	2.33	3.52	3.70	−0.64	−0.90
23	329	VW	2	4.96	3.17	2.83	4.60	2.90	3.14	5.18	4.62	0.05	0.02
24	331	VW	4	5.02	3.17	2.83	4.60	3.03	2.80	4.64	4.43	−0.17	−0.16
25	307	VW	3	4.53	3.17	2.83	4.60	2.95	3.03	5.09	4.65	−0.01	0.05

(Continued)

TABLE 3 | (Continued)

Encounter	*N*	Brand	Sales person	Visual brand Fit	Masculine brand personality	Feminine brand personality	Brand equity before sales encounter	Masculine employee personality	Feminine employee personality	Encounter experience	Brand equity after sales encounter	Personality difference	Difference in brand equity
26	342	VW	5	5.71	3.17	2.83	4.60	2.72	2.60	4.25	4.09	−0.68	−0.51
27	299	VW	8	6.99	3.17	2.83	4.60	2.86	2.76	4.80	4.52	−0.38	−0.07
28	321	VW	7	6.27	3.17	2.83	4.60	2.89	2.15	3.04	3.32	−0.96	−1.27
29	352	VW	6	5.09	3.17	2.83	4.60	3.07	2.52	3.99	4.02	−0.40	−0.57
30	309	VW	9	4.83	3.17	2.83	4.60	2.73	2.87	4.77	4.43	−0.40	−0.17
31	304	LUFTHANSA	1	4.90	3.14	2.90	4.70	2.90	2.25	3.12	3.33	−0.89	−1.38
32	317	LUFTHANSA	5	4.99	3.14	2.90	4.70	2.72	2.24	3.28	3.44	−1.08	−1.27
33	308	LUFTHANSA	6	4.10	3.14	2.90	4.70	2.96	2.47	3.72	3.93	−0.61	−0.77
34	326	LUFTHANSA	9	4.29	3.14	2.90	4.70	2.69	2.96	5.01	4.76	−0.39	0.06
35	326	LUFTHANSA	8	6.59	3.14	2.90	4.70	2.83	2.92	5.06	4.77	−0.29	0.07
36	313	LUFTHANSA	2	6.04	3.14	2.90	4.70	2.91	3.23	5.52	4.87	0.10	0.17
37	321	LUFTHANSA	4	5.19	3.14	2.90	4.70	2.95	3.09	5.22	4.78	0.00	0.08
38	296	LUFTHANSA	3	4.99	3.14	2.90	4.70	2.86	3.07	5.22	4.72	−0.11	0.01
39	302	SPARKASSE	4	5.81	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.89	2.68	4.57	4.21	−0.02	−0.22
40	341	SPARKASSE	2	5.40	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.97	3.06	4.98	4.40	0.45	−0.03
41	334	SPARKASSE	3	4.73	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.90	2.87	5.03	4.47	0.19	0.04
42	320	SPARKASSE	1	5.44	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.90	2.31	3.57	3.44	−0.37	−0.99
43	325	SPARKASSE	5	5.13	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.87	2.76	4.75	4.34	0.05	−0.09
44	305	SPARKASSE	5	5.13	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.91	2.48	3.95	3.81	−0.19	−0.62
45	320	SPARKASSE	6	4.23	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.90	2.26	3.48	3.55	−0.42	−0.89
46	336	SPARKASSE	8	6.19	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.86	2.68	4.50	4.13	−0.04	−0.30
47	289	SPARKASSE	7	5.27	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.85	2.65	4.56	4.21	−0.08	−0.23
48	335	SPARKASSE	7	5.27	2.91	2.67	4.43	2.94	2.25	3.30	3.29	−0.39	−1.14

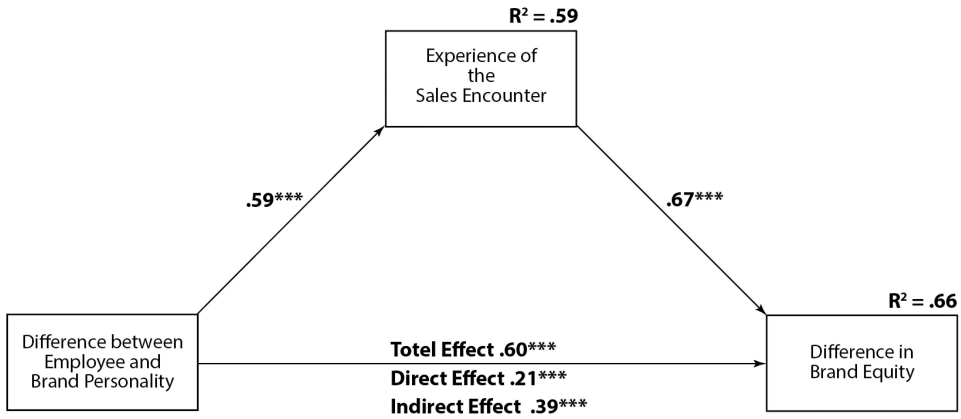

FIGURE 2 | Mediation model. ***$p < 0.001$.

according to the six brands was assessed. The participants had to rank the employees from 1 to 9. From the average rankings, the ratings were calculated, ranging from 9 points (highest ranking) to 1 point (lowest ranking).

Study 1 Results

A total of 507 respondents participated in Study 1 (51.7% female, M_{Age} = 42.8 years, SD_{Age} = 13.6 years). Since each respondent answered questions about three randomly selected brands out of the six possible brands, about 1,500 brand evaluations were received, which resulted in an average of 250 ratings for each brand. The brand gender items were aggregated to the masculine brand personality (MBP) and the feminine brand personality (FBP), respectively, and the five items of the Brady et al. (2008) were aggregated to brand equity (**Tables 1A,B**).

The brand personalities and brand equities differed significantly across the six brands [$F(5,1496) = 4.142$, $p < 0.001$ for MBP; $F(5,1493) = 10.778$, $p < 0.001$ for FBP; $F(5,1502) = 10.856$, $p < 0.001$ for brand equity]. Similar to previous studies (Lieven et al., 2014; Lieven and Hildebrand, 2016), brand gender (as brand personality) increased brand equity. In a linear regression, MBP increased brand equity by 0.331, FBP increased brand equity by 0.293, and the interaction of MBP × FBP increased brand equity by 0.079 (all p's < 0.001, $R^2 = 0.342$). This supports H1.

The ratings for the visual brand fit of nine salespersons are shown in **Table 2**. The higher the ratings, the better the perceived fit to the respective brand. In general, female salespersons seem to have a better brand fit to traditionally feminine brands (NIVEA and C&A) and male salespersons seem to have a better brand fit to traditionally masculine brands (CANON and VW). For LUFTHANSA and SPARKASSE, the brand ratings are more equally distributed since these brands are neither masculine nor feminine (Lieven, 2018).

Study 2: Employee Personality and Brand Equity After the Sales Encounter

In 48 different scenarios, the six brands were presented to the survey participants combined with one picture of the salespersons shown in **Table 2** and an audio file with an oral sales encounter. The encounters differed regarding the salesperson's competence and friendliness. The wording and the prosody (i.e., rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech) were manipulated on a convenience level. The aim was to create a collection of everyday encounters that consumers could have experienced[1]. In order to control for the effects of unkindness or incompetence, different sales encounters were applied to the same brand and the same salesperson where only the behavior was manipulated, respectively.

The respondents were first asked to rate the respective employee's personality based on Grohmann's (2009) gender personality model. Then, they had to rate their impression of the sales encounter in relation to courtesy, competence, attractiveness, and friendliness. Thereafter, the respondents rated their attitude to the respective brand based on Brady et al. 's (2008) equity model.

Study 2 Results

A total of 3,824 respondents participated in Study 2 (52.9% female, M_{Age} = 43.0 years, SD_{Age} = 12.9 years). Each respondent rated randomly four of the 48 sales encounters, which resulted in an average of more than 300 ratings per scenario (a total of 15,296 evaluations). The scores were aggregated to masculine and feminine employee personalities, sales encounter experience, and brand equity after the sales encounter. To determine the shift from the baseline scores from Study 1 to the actual scores after the sales encounter in Study 2, the respective personality and equity scores were subtracted. The results are presented in **Table 3**, which give a first impression that the personality difference and the sales encounter correlate with the shift in brand equity. When the sales encounter experience is above average and the difference in personality is positive, the brand equity increases.

[1]The sales encounters can be downloaded from www.researchfiles.com/01.mp4 where 01 to 48 is the number of the respective scenario 01, 02,…48. Although the language is German, the appropriateness of the encounters can be evaluated by anyone through their prosody (rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech).

For a more in-depth analysis, all 15,296 ratings were evaluated with a linear regression of personality difference as the independent variable and equity change as the outcome variable. The standardized coefficient was positive and significant 0.60 ($p < 0.001$), which supports H2. Thus, the more negative the difference between the employee's and the brand's personality, the greater the loss in brand equity, and vice versa. Performing the same regression with the sales encounter experience instead of personality change also resulted in a significant positive coefficient, which supports H3 (0.794, $p < 0.001$). Both the sales encounter experience and the difference in brand and salesperson personality contribute to the change in brand equity. To ascertain the importance of both variables on the equity change, a model with the sales encounter experience as a mediator was evaluated. This resulted in a direct effect of personality change of only 0.21 instead of the total effect of 0.60 ($p < 0.001$). Consequently, as seen in **Figure 2**, the encounter experience mediated personality difference by an indirect effect of $0.59 \times 0.67 = 0.39$ ($p < 0.001$). Thus, H4 is supported as well.

To ascertain the role of the visual brand fit of the employee to the brand, linear regression resulted in a small, but positive, effect of 0.07, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.0049$. The high significance is due to the high number of cases: 15,296. Calculating Cohen's f (Cohen, 1988; Selya et al., 2012) to assess the effect size of visual fit resulted in a low value of $0.0049/(1–0.0049) = 0.005$, which is well below 0.02 where the effects start to have at least a small effect (Cohen, 1988). Including the visual brand fit in the above model as a further mediator resulted in a small increase in the coefficient of determination from 0.6581 to 0.6597; thus, the *a priori* visual brand fit has no influence on behavioral branding. As a comparison, inclusion of the sales encounter as a mediator increases the R^2 of the outcome variable with a very large effect size [Cohen's $f = (0.66–0.36)/(1–0.66) = 0.88$].

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to demonstrate how adequate or inadequate behavioral branding affects brand equity. While the evaluation of behavior is mostly intuitive, this study operationalized behavior using two components: personality and the sales encounter experience. The construct of gender allowed for a comparison of the salesperson's personality and the brand's personality. The more the employee's personality outperformed a brand's personality, the more brand equity was strengthened, and vice versa. The sales encounter experience had a stronger effect; however, it did not suppress the personality effect, it partly mediated it.

As seen in the results presented in **Table 3**, in some cases, it was only possible to increase the *a priori* brand equity. That means that behavioral branding should attempt to maintain the level of the existing equity. It is more likely that consumers will experience cognitive dissonance as a result of conflicting information regarding the brand rather than being positively surprised by adequate behavioral branding.

The choice of gender as a personality model was done consciously. There are other personality models (Aaker, 1997; Geuens et al., 2009), but they are increasingly being criticized for not being reproducible or for not being able to be applied to both people and brands (Caprara et al., 2001; Austin et al., 2003). The Grohmann (2009) gender model turned out to be well-suited to describing humans and brands [for an in-depth analysis see Lieven (2017, 2018)]. As well, there might be more components that influence brand equity than only personality and sales encounter. However, these two seemed to be the most suitable to be measured in a quantitative study.

The results were not differentiated according to masculine or feminine brands and employees. Lieven and Hildebrand (2016) and Lieven (2018) have shown that the simultaneous increase in masculinity and femininity increases brand strength even further. It may then be androgynous brands that are among the strongest (in this sample, Nivea could be such an androgynous brand). For this reason, the summed-up gender characteristics of the employees were compared with those of the summed-up brand genders.

All the coefficients of the regression model were highly significant. This is not surprising with the large sample size of Study 2 since a larger number of cases increases the significance. However, what is surprising is the high degree of explained variance, which tends to diminish in larger samples. Overall, two-thirds of the brand equity changes are explained by the mediation model ($R^2 = 0.66$).

The problem of common method bias or source bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003) could be solved at least for the brand equities since these were assessed as baseline scores without the sales encounter, and separately before and after the sales encounter in different surveys. Thus, the brand equity evaluations before the sales encounter could not bias the equity evaluations after the encounter. A single factor test (Harman, 1976) for the data of Study 2 resulted in 52.9% of explained variance, which is slightly above the threshold of 50%. However, a three-factor solution showed differentiated constructs for the masculine and feminine personalities. The third factor consisted of the sales encounter experience and the brand equity, which caused the high explained variance. However, as has been shown, brand equity was strongly affected by the sales encounter experience, and a high consistency between both constructs is not surprising. Thus, unwanted bias did not influence equity; rather, equity was affected by the outcome of the sales encounter.

The demonstration of the impact of behavioral branding on brand equity is a strong theoretical contribution of this study. However, results may be even more important for practitioners. The findings provide opportunities to control brand awareness, including the training of their brand ambassadors which might become as same as important as technical or competence training. The personality concept can help to increase the fit between the brand and the employee since both brands and humans can be endowed with personality. Managing brand personality thus also means managing employees' personality.

As often in scientific research the experimental designs were hypothetical. Studies conducted with real-world salespersons would be a promising venue for further research.

PARTICIPANTS

Human survey respondents in this study were randomly invited to participate on a voluntary basis. There are no identifiable images or data in the manuscript. The images of the stimuli for the sales personal are professional photographies licensed from istockphoto.com.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Fostering Enterprise Performance Through Employee Brand Engagement and Knowledge Sharing Culture: Mediating Role of Innovative Capability

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Enterprise performance is a critical component of any organizational success that is directly affected by its employees and the culture prevailing in the organizations. In order to gain strategic advantage from the employee brand equity it is important that organizations make efforts in retaining such employees that benefit the organizations. Therefore, this research examines the impact of employee brand equity and knowledge sharing culture on the enterprise performance with the mediating role of innovative capabilities. A self-administered survey was conducted among the 323 employees of information technology sector working in the software houses in China. Smart PLS has been used to analyze the data through partial least square structural equation modeling. Results of the study have demonstrated that knowledge sharing culture plays a significant role in the enterprise performance while employee brand equity could not find statistically significant impact on enterprise performance. In addition, the SEM analysis further showed that employee brand equity and knowledge sharing culture play a significant role in the innovative capabilities. Results also revealed that innovative capabilities mediate the effect of employee brand equity and knowledge sharing culture variables on the enterprise performance. This research enriches the literature by examining the role of knowledge sharing culture in enterprise performance and innovative capabilities. This research further offers certain implications for the human resource department in developing their human resources. This can be achieved by availing the maximum skills of the branded employees by creating learning opportunities for the other employees through training sessions where they help and share their experiences.

Keywords: enterprise performance, knowledge sharing culture, innovation, innovative capabilities, employee brand equity

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INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is recognized as a persistent, positive, and pervasive work-related psychological phenomenon related to the dedication and vigor efforts taken by the employees toward the organization (Sharma et al., 2021). This type of proactive employee behavior is not only restricted to organizations but goes beyond job needs (Van Nguyen et al., 2021). In the present era,

organizations operate in a highly competitive business environment. Due to thisreason, the firms require proactive employees for adapting, responding, and quickly engaging to the fierce market challenges (Paulsen, 2016). Employees' willingness to engage in pro-active work engagement helps in overcoming the competitive challenges. The enterprise performance is highly dependent on the employees and their ability to serve the organization both effectively and efficiently. Additionally, the transfer of knowledge within the organization equally contributes to the success of the organization (Venkatesh et al., 2022). Research evidence reports that employee-related and organizational-related factors are essential for the growth and survival of modern business organizations in this highly competitive business environment.

Enterprise performance is a concept of public management practice and research that mainly deals with aspects band factors that boost the performance (Le and Le, 2019). However, this concept has been a debatable topic for a long time (Al Mamun and Fazal, 2018). This debate centered on the idea that enterprise performance is fostered by the effectiveness and efficiency of business operations. Enterprise performance is fostered by various factors that prevail in the organization. Researchers argued that every organization is finding effective ways to enhance enterprise performance because high performance leads toward completive advantage (Mutenyo et al., 2021). The management of the organizations devises different novel strategies in order to increase enterprise performance (Wang et al., 2022). According to Si and Si (2019), the role of employees is highly significant in boosting the performance of the organization. In the recent era, the role of innovation also plays a role in affecting enterprise performance (Li et al., 2019). The firms that invest in innovative strategies and innovation immensely boost the performance of the firm. Innovation within a firm should be highly encouraged by the management because innovation can speed up the business operations, hence increasing the level of efficiency. Pinheiro et al. (2020) asserted that the flow of information is necessary for bringing innovation to the organization and maximizing enterprise performance.

Employee brand engagement is activity related to the employees' involvement in the organization's brand (Van Nguyen et al., 2021). This engagement shows that employees are willing to improve the overall performance of the enterprise by achieving the brand's goals and objectives. Employee brand engagement is beneficial for the organizations because employees who are engaged with the brand work as marketers for the firm (Yousf and Khurshid, 2021). The marketers, then, promote the organizational brand to potential employees and customers at minimal or no cost, thus increasing interpersonal interaction with stakeholders and enhancing the firm's performance. Moreover, brand engagement is crucial for organizational performance because the willingness of the employees leads to enhanced employee performance.

Organizations develop strategies to engage the employee to induce employee brand engagement. Branding itself is a complex phenomenon that needs the attention of researchers (Venkatesh et al., 2022). Scholars have emphasized the methods taken by organizations to enhance a firm's performance through employee brand engagement. The employees who are given the right to participate in decision-making tend to engage in employee brand engagement. Such employees perceive an organization as their own; therefore, they show high engagement toward the job and the organization (Pitt et al., 2018). Moreover, literature also showed that employee brand engagement helps the firm to achieve a competitive advantage by promoting the brand to the stakeholders. Such efforts led by the employees generate revenue and profit for the firm (Paulsen, 2016).

The literature has shown the importance of knowledge sharing that includes experiences, knowledge, and skills of the organizational members (Halisah et al., 2020). Both practitioner-related publications and academic contributions have emphasized promoting knowledge-sharing culture and disseminating information as much as possible (Azeem et al., 2021). In the process of knowledge sharing, the employees develop social interaction and interpersonal skills. Knowledge-sharing culture facilities access to knowledge and establish trust and a positive working environment for the employees (Al Kurdi et al., 2021). Knowledge is regarded as the most valuable resource for the organization. Scholars argue that sharing knowledge not only increases value for achieving competitive advantage but also develops skills among the employees.

Knowledge sharing is comprised of three significant aspects i.e., the process of knowledge sharing, the type of knowledge shared within the firm, and the approaches of knowledge sharing (Intezari et al., 2017). The two most important processes of knowledge sharing are knowledge collection and knowledge donation. Knowledge is donated by the employees who communicate their knowledge to others, while, knowledge is collected by the employees who want to gain information (Li et al., 2021). The firms that encourage the employees to share knowledge and devise favorable policies develop a knowledge-sharing culture. The equal distribution of knowledge around the organization benefits the employees and the organization in terms of high employee and organizational performance (Azeem et al., 2021).

Swift technological advancement and a competitive business environment foster the organizations to utilize their resources like human capital to enhance innovative capability (Tong et al., 2019). The innovative capability enables the organizations to develop, invent value, and attain long-term competitive advantage (Le and Le, 2019). Moreover, innovative capability helps the firms to adjust to uncertain internal and internal environments in an effective manner and leads toward the success of the organization (Hou et al., 2019). The management of the organizations is mainly responsible for promoting the innovative capability of the employees through their effective decisions and organizational policies. The innovative capabilities of the employees are also enhanced by introducing new advanced technology in the organization.

Scientific developments and technologies in the era of globalization and a fast-changing environment benefit the firms to become flexible, efficient, and responsive (Hong et al., 2019). Consequently, the employees develop innovative capabilities that benefit the organization in the long run. In addition, innovation is highly needed in this fierce business environment

because without innovation the organizations cannot survive (Le and Le, 2019). Various employee-related and organizational-related factors significantly contribute to inducing innovative capabilities. For example, decision-making power, knowledge sharing culture, supportive leadership, and employee engagement are some important factors that enable the innovative capabilities of the employees (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Studies, such as (Uddin et al., 2019) and (Sakka and Ahammad, 2020), have been undertaken to investigate the role of employee engagement on different organizational factors. For example, (Uddin et al., 2019) examined the impact of employee engagement on team performance with the mediation of organizational citizenship behavior and employee commitment. In addition, (Sakka and Ahammad, 2020) analyzed the influence of employee brand ambassadorship on employee usage with the mediating role of employee wellbeing in the context of social media. The authors of these studies suggested inculcating different organizational and employee-related factors in the existing model. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the impact of two important organizational and employee-related factors i.e., employee brand engagement and knowledge sharing culture on enterprise performance. Organizational behavior literature demonstrated the need to examine the factors that lead to enterprise performance. To the best of the author's knowledge, a lack of evidence is present related to the mediating role of innovative capabilities in the organizational context. In addition, studies like (Sharma et al., 2021) emphasized investigating the antecedents and precedents of innovative capabilities. Thus, the study intends to analyze the mediating role of innovative capability in the relationship between employee brand engagement and enterprise performance and between knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance.

The present study developed a few objectives based on the literature, which are to: examine the impact of employee brand engagement on enterprise performance, investigate the influence of knowledge sharing culture on enterprise performance, analyze the role of employee brand engagement on innovative capabilities, and determine the role of knowledge sharing culture on innovative capabilities. The study also established the objectives related to the mediating role of innovative capabilities, which are to: investigate the mediating role of innovative capabilities in the relationship between employee brand engagement and enterprise performance and analyze the mediating role of innovative capabilities in the relationship between knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance. The research questions have also been developed which are: what is the impact of employee brand engagement on enterprise performance? What is the influence of knowledge-sharing culture on enterprise performance? What is the role of employee brand engagement on innovative capabilities? What is the role of knowledge-sharing culture on innovative capabilities? The study also established the research questions related to the mediating role of innovative capabilities, and the questions are: do innovative capabilities mediate the relationship between employee brand engagement and enterprise performance? And do innovative capabilities mediate the relationship between knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The study intends to analyze the role of organizational-related and employee-related factors that affect enterprise performance. In this regard, the study examined the role of employee brand engagement and knowledge sharing culture on enterprise performance in China. The study also determined the mediating effect of innovative capabilities in the relationship between employee brand engagement and enterprise performance. The framework of the study has been based on social exchange theory (SET) and employee stewardship theory (SET).

Social Exchange Theory

The social exchange theory (SET) developed by Homans (1958) states that the exchange process affects the social behavior of individuals. This exchange aims to enhance the benefits while reducing costs. This theory also explains that people value the benefits and risks associated with social relationships. However, if the risks are more than the benefits then the individuals abandon the relationship. SET claims that when the benefits are high, the social relationship between the individuals gets stronger. In the organizational context, this social exchange results in benefiting the entire organization because the employees are willing to work effectively and develop relevant skills in an environment that encourage and promotes positive relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2016).

Based on the conceptual framework of the study, the hypotheses proposed that a knowledge-sharing culture affects innovative capabilities and enterprise performance. In the light of the social exchange theory, the theory explicitly states that the benefits obtained by the individual during the social exchange are beneficial for the organization. Knowledge-sharing culture promotes social relationships and interactions within the organization because employees communicate with one another while sharing knowledge. Consequently, the social relationship built through knowledge sharing influences the innovative capabilities of the employees and enterprise performance.

Employee Stewardship Theory

Employee stewardship theory (EST) developed by Donaldson and Davis (2016) explains that individuals possess intrinsic motivation to work for organizations and others in order to achieve the assigned tasks and responsibilities given to them. In order words, employees who want to work for the organization put extra effort to accomplish the goals and enhance the performance of the organization. Moreover, employee stewardship theory emphasized the fact that intrinsic motivation is necessary to boost the morale of the employees to work effectively for the organization. Under the employee stewardship theory (EST), employees essentially want to do their job effectively and become good stewards of the organization.

The framework of the study demonstrated that employee brand engagement impacts innovative capabilities and enterprise performance. This is based on employee stewardship theory which also states that employees' intrinsic motivation allows

them to work effectively for the organization. Thus, intrinsic motivation (employee brand engagement) positively develops innovation capabilities of the employees to meet the goals and objectives of the organization and enhance enterprise performance. The innovative capabilities are significant for the employees because the present era requires employees who can think innovatively and creatively for the organization.

Relationship Between Employee Brand Engagement and Enterprise Performance

Employee brand engagement is activity related to the employees' involvement in the organization's brand (Van Nguyen et al., 2021). It is one of the key indicators of organizational success (Ahmed et al., 2020). This type of engagement predicts the financial performance of the organization and organizational success along with the performance of the employees. It impacts the efficiency and production level of the organization, organizational reputation, customer retention, advocacy, and culture of the organization (Al-dalahmeh et al., 2018). This signifies that employee brand engagement is a highly significant aspect that not only impacts the organization but also the external organizational environment. Employees who focus on their work and are aware of their surrounding environment justify high engagement and this ultimately leads to maximum competition with minimal confusion (Linggiallo et al., 2021). Moreover, the employees who are engaged in their work and work passionately perform higher than the employees who show low engagement. Employees with high engagement contribute to the success of the enterprise. According to Alola and Alafeshat (2021), enthusiasm, inspiration, and dedication are all related to the high engagement of the employees.

The performance of the organization or enterprise is based on articulated, well-planned, and effective employee brand engagement policies and strategies. Studies have attempted to establish different techniques for developing employee brand engagement, refining employee brand engagement, and understanding this complex phenomenon (Yuniati et al., 2021). For example, He et al. (2021) examined the factors that greatly contributed to employee engagement and the results presented that equity, values, workload, communities, control, and rewards impact employee engagement. The author also discussed that transfer of information, thoughts, and ideas influence the employee brand engagement within the organization. Ahmed et al. (2020) claimed that most studies focused not only on the aspects that impact employee brand engagement but also on organizational outcomes associated with employee brand engagement. To explain this, Schneider et al. (2018) studied the impact of workforce engagement on organizational performance and revealed that organizational performance is the descendent of workforce engagement among publicly traded companies.

The relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance among information technology (IT) employees have been found by Al-dalahmeh et al. (2018) who claimed that employee engagement is closely related to organizational performance through job satisfaction. Another recent study that showed similar results was carried out by Yuniati et al. (2021) who claimed that talent management is positively and significantly related to organizational performance *via* employee engagement. Moreover, Anwar and Abdullah (2021) conducted a study on government employees of Iraq to investigate the influence of human resource practices on organizational performance. The outcomes demonstrated that employee training and engagement had a strong influence on organizational performance while decentralization has no impact on organizational performance. Most of the studies have examined the role of employee engagement on organizational performance, however, very few studies explored the impact of employee brand engagement on organizational performance. Thus, based on the literature, this study analyzed the effect of employee brand engagement on enterprise performance, and the hypothesis has been developed as follows:

> $\boldsymbol{H}_1$. *Employee Brand Engagement has an effect on Enterprise Performance*

Relationship Between Knowledge Sharing Culture and Enterprise Performance

In this present era of a knowledge-based economy, the role of knowledge is crucial in enhancing the overall value of the organization (Singh et al., 2021). Individuals possessing high knowledge enable the organizations to extend and achieve the performance that ultimately leads toward organizational sustainability (Le and Le, 2019). Nonetheless, organizations that do not promote a knowledge-sharing culture cannot perform well in this highly competitive business environment. Prior studies, for example, Ohemeng and Kamga (2020), claimed that entrepreneurs who share and participate in the valuable knowledge enhance entrepreneurial performance which consequently impacts organizational performance. Knowledge-sharing culture helps in adopting new technology, problem-solving, inventing something new, and developing the dynamic capabilities of a firm Singh et al. (2021). These factors significantly affect the overall organizational performance by achieving the goals and objectives of the organization.

Organizational culture dynamically influences the system of learning in which employees can exchange and share ideas or job experiences through social interactions and communication (Oyemomi et al., 2019). The cognitive abilities of the employees are affected when exposed to a new culture of knowledge sharing Suchitra et al. (2020). Consequently, these abilities allow the employees to show high performance which leads to high organizational performance. In other words, knowledge sharing culture pacifies the knowledge creation environment and regulates the behavior of the employees which is highly significant for knowledge exchange and creation (Singh et al., 2021). Thus, it is imperative for the organization to encourage the environment of utilizing these cognitive abilities during socialization at work for creating, sharing, and using the knowledge.

The knowledge-sharing ability of the employees develops the capability to attain a competitive advantage (Meher et al., 2022). Researchers argued that knowledge sharing culture encourages

the capabilities of the employees and organization to develop new products, involve in change, and show a willingness to increase the overall performance of the organization (Li et al., 2020). Oyemomi et al. (2019) argued that developing a knowledge-sharing culture along with, trained employees and supportive leadership boosts organizational performance. Knowledge-sharing culture helps the employees to put forward their opinions, ideas, and thoughts for the betterment of the organization (Oyemomi et al., 2019). The culture of knowledge sharing builds interpersonal trust, intention to share knowledge, personal motivation, and reciprocal relationship which consequently lead to organizational success (Li et al., 2020). To the best of the author's knowledge, there is still room to investigate the impact of a knowledge-sharing culture on enterprise performance in different contexts. Therefore, this study postulated that:

> ***H*$_2$.** *Knowledge Sharing Culture has an effect on Enterprise Performance*

Relationship Between Employee Brand Engagement and Innovative Capabilities

Employee innovative capabilities rely on employee engagement (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020). The employees who are engaged with their job and organization strive to develop skills that can benefit the organization. However, employees with less engagement show poor work performance which ultimately affects the overall organizational performance (Ben Moussa and El Arbi, 2020). Such employees do not put any effort to change their behavior for the betterment of the organization. Azeem et al. (2021) claimed that training does not affect the employees with low engagement because they do not show a willingness to work for the organization. However, highly engaged employees go beyond their regular responsibilities and develop innovative capabilities that result in better performance (Ahmed et al., 2020). Employee engagement in the organization enables the employees to work effectively for the organization by learning something new, developing innovative skills, and saving organizational resources Paillé and Valéau (2020). Hence, innovative capabilities can be achieved if the employees are engaged.

The engagement of the top management toward their organization impacts the employee engagement level (Le and Lei, 2019). In brief, employee engagement to change (here, innovative capabilities) is significant for the organizational processes and ability to innovate products that fulfills the need of the market (Paulsen, 2016). Employee engagement to develop innovative capabilities positively impacts their willingness to create innovative products. Conversely, without employee engagement, the innovation would be challenging to achieve (Zheng et al., 2022). Highly engaged employees find ways to improve the operations of the organization, therefore they develop innovative capabilities that can help in better organizational performance. Moreover, substantial studies and previous literature on the relationship between employee engagement and innovation showed that engagement is a key to competitiveness and innovation (Ben Moussa and El Arbi, 2020). Hence the innovative capability is developed among the employees if they are engaged in their job or organization to achieve competitive advantage in this business environment. Highly engaged employees perform innovatively in the organization and attract potential employees.

Employee engagement leads to innovation through the innovative capabilities of the employees, and due to these capabilities, employees do beyond their roles by collaborating with their peers, making improvements for the organization, and working for the organization to stand in the business market (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020). Employee engagement assumes an important precedent for innovation and creativity in the workplace (Knox and Marin-Cadavid, 2022). The authors claimed that the social exchange theory (SET) is the theoretical bases of engagement and innovative capability of the individuals. This theory suggests that, when employees are given value in terms of training and empowerment, they feel a sense of consideration, thus, they return the favor to the organization by engaging with the organization. High engagement leads to creative and innovative behavior as the employees perform more than their responsibilities (Kwon and Kim, 2020). On the basis of the above literature and social exchange theory, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

> ***H*$_3$.** *Employee Brand Engagement has an effect on Innovative Capabilities*

Relationship Between Knowledge Sharing Culture and Innovative Capabilities

One of the most crucial factors that encourage innovation in the employees is a knowledge-sharing culture (Castaneda and Cuellar, 2020). Innovative behavior of the employees is unlikely to occur if the organizations do not promote a knowledge sharing culture (Kremer et al., 2019). Gaining skills and knowledge by collaborating with colleagues and peers has been an efficient and effective way to be successful in terms of innovation (Bukht and Heeks, 2017). Knowledge sharing in the context of innovation signifies the exchange of expertise for creating and improving the services and products offered by the organization. Organizations regard knowledge sharing as a resource that enables product development capability through innovation (Arsawan et al., 2022). Hong et al. (2019) claimed on the basis of a meta-analysis that a knowledge-sharing culture is closely related to team performance. However, a lack of knowledge can hinder the innovative capabilities of the employees (Intezari et al., 2017). Organizations that encourage a knowledge-sharing culture produce new ideas and develop innovative capabilities among the employees. Additionally, Castaneda and Cuellar (2020) revealed that businesses that are highly engaged in knowledge networks produce employees with higher innovative capabilities.

There are mainly two types of knowledge i.e., tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. Singh et al. (2021) found that tacit knowledge has a stronger association with innovative capability as opposed to explicit knowledge. The reason is tacit knowledge cannot be replicated by others. However, knowledge sharing can convert tacit knowledge into explicit, and both types enable innovation in the organization. The most fruitful route that leads

to innovative behavior is informal knowledge sharing which is induced if the organizations promote a culture of knowledge sharing (Kremer et al., 2019). The knowledge-sharing culture encourages the employees to be innovative in terms of the propensity to devise innovative strategies to create novel products (Halisah et al., 2020). A recent investigation also found that knowledge sharing reduces job stress and facilities the innovative behavior of the employees (Montani and Staglianò, 2022). Few studies have investigated the impact of knowledge sharing on innovation, but limited evidence is available with regards to the knowledge sharing culture and innovative capabilities, which is the objective of the present study. Several authors have identified the importance of examining knowledge-sharing culture and innovative capabilities together. On the basis of the above discussion, the following hypothesis has been posited:

> ***H*$_4$.** *Knowledge Sharing Culture has an effect on Innovative Capabilities*

Mediating Role of Innovative Capabilities

Organizations are developing strategies and methods to maximize the innovative capabilities of the employees for sustaining competitive advantage (Hong et al., 2019). Innovative performance directly impacts organizational performance because developing new products attract customers (Shanker et al., 2017). Moreover, employee engagement facilitates innovative behavior because when the employees are engaged, they develop a sense of consideration and find effective ways to benefit the organization. Ismail et al. (2019) investigated the influence of employee engagement on job performance with the mediation of creativity among the employees working in Lebanon and found that employee engagement and job performance are positively related to each other and creativity fully mediated the relationship. Innovative capabilities are built in the employees who feel a deeper sense of engagement with their job or organization, which in turn benefits the whole organization (Venkatesh et al., 2022).

Both motivation and employee engagement are the biggest drivers of innovative work behavior (Knox and Marin-Cadavid, 2022). Employees develop innovative capabilities as a result of intrinsic motivation and engagement with their organization or job. As employees become innovative, they strategically develop innovative methods to solve daily tasks which in turn positively influence the overall organizational performance (Le and Le, 2019). Innovative capabilities of the employees as a result of employee engagement make the employees do their job beyond their responsibilities. This results in better organizational performance and achieving a competitive advantage in the fierce business market (Al Kurdi et al., 2021). The employees who are highly engaged in their job find ways to improve the operations of the organization, therefore they develop innovative capabilities that can help in better organizational performance. Employee engagement in the organization enables the employees to work effectively for the organization by learning something new, developing innovative skills, and saving organizational resources (Paillé and Valéau, 2020). Innovative capability helps the firms to adjust to uncertain internal and internal environments effectively and leads toward the success of the organization (Hou et al., 2019).

Innovation is regarded as an important indicator of organizational success which is the key to attaining competitive advantage (Ben Moussa and El Arbi, 2020). According to Suchitra et al. (2020), the culture of the organization matters to a great extent when it comes to innovation and organizational performance. Existing research supports that a knowledge-sharing culture and innovative capabilities are important indicators of organizational performance and competitive advantage. The scholars argued that knowledge sharing and innovative capabilities are closely associated with one another (Montani and Staglianò, 2022). When these factors are aligned together, they can bring better organizational strategies and desirable organizational performance (Singh et al., 2021). Substantial studies showed the significant role of knowledge management and knowledge sharing in the development of innovative capabilities (Kremer et al., 2019). In other words, knowledge-sharing culture promotes innovative capabilities, skills, and competencies for the betterment of the organization. Prior studies, for example, Ohemeng and Kamga (2020), claimed that entrepreneurs who share and participate in the valuable knowledge enhance entrepreneurial performance which consequently impacts organizational performance.

Although studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between employee engagements, knowledge sharing culture, enterprise performance, and innovative capabilities, limited studies focused on the mediating role of innovative capabilities in the relationship between employee brand engagement and enterprise performance and between knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance. Therefore, this study proposed that:

> ***H*$_5$.** *Innovative capabilities mediate the relationship between Employee Brand Engagement and Enterprise Performance*

> ***H*$_6$.** *Innovative capabilities mediate the relationship between Knowledge Sharing Culture and Enterprise Performance*

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual model which has been developed on the basis of the proposed hypothesis and the literature:

METHODOLOGY

The effects of employee brand engagement and knowledge sharing culture on enterprise performance, in addition to the mediating role of innovative capabilities were checked and analyzed in this study. This research has used a quantitative research design along with deductive approach to check the above-mentioned effects and mediating relationships. In particular, the hypotheses have been developed through rigorous review of literature in the study for checking the effect of employee brand engagement and knowledge sharing culture

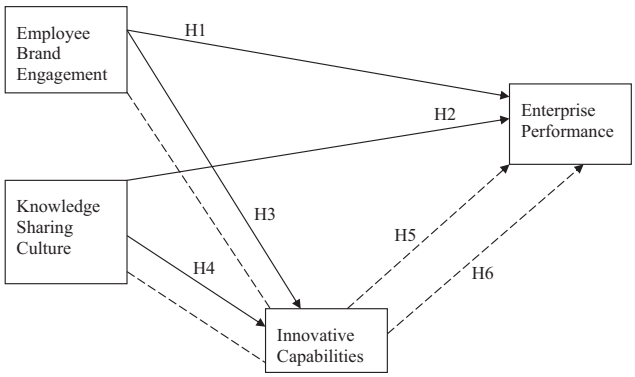

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual model. EBE, employee brand equity, KSC, knowledge sharing culture, IC, innovative capabilities, EP, enterprise performance.

on the enterprise performance. Quantitative research design has been used in this study to make sure that biases do not affect the analysis and results of this research. The data collection process for this research was aided through the questionnaire survey that was administered by the researcher themselves. The respondents were encouraged to stay neutral since there is no correct or false response to the questions given. The population selected in this study is the employees of information technology sector working in the software houses in China. The sampling technique used in this research was the convenience sampling as it gives the liberty to the researcher to collect data from the respondents based on the availability of the respondents and comfort of the researcher (Scholtz and Scholtz, 2021). The unit of analysis in this research was the individuals as it is collected from the employees working in the software houses in China. A total of 500 paper-based questionnaires were disseminated after ensuring the clarity of the content of the questionnaire to the participants and precision in understanding to ensure the rationality of data collected. The questionnaires received that were finally used in the analysis of data were 323 (response rate of 64.6%). The ethics of the research have been fulfilled by making the respondents easy and comfortable to freely fill the questionnaire, as their responses were kept anonymous. The responses obtained from the respondents were analyzed using the statistical software to check the hypotheses. However, before checking the hypotheses, the data was screened for the initial validation if it showed reliability and validity.

Statistical Tool

Structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis has been employed on the data to reach the concluding behavior of the data. It has followed the partial least square approach using the software Smart PLS. This helps the researcher to analyze data with the help of path modeling in a short time (Hair et al., 2014). Through this software, the variable that act as dependent variable in one relationship behaves as the independent variable in subsequent relationship without affecting the other paths (Meng and Bari, 2019). The data is analyzed through measurement and structural model stages. These help the researcher to screen the data using validity, reliability and support or deject the hypotheses formulated based on the significance of the results.

Scales

A five-point Liker scale-based questionnaire has been used by the researchers to collect data from the respondents. Description of the scales used for each variable has been given in below.

Scale for the independent variable of employee brand engagement consisting of nine items has been borrowed from Tsourvakas and Yfantidou (2018). The sample item includes "I think my job is considered important in my company." The scale for the second independent variable of knowledge sharing culture consisting of three items has been borrowed from Kim and Lee (2006). The sample item includes "I can freely access documents, information, and knowledge held by other divisions within the organization." The scale for the mediating variable of innovative capabilities consisting of three items has been borrowed from Sharma et al. (2021). The sample item includes "The enterprise uses the most efficient materials during the process of product development, design, or production." Sale for the dependent variable of enterprise performance consisting of nine items has been borrowed from Sharma et al. (2021). The sample item includes "Our firm conforms with the requirements of inputs." These scales have helped the researcher to collect data from the potential respondents.

Demographic Profile

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The female participation (65.94%) has been higher in the survey than male participation (34.05%). This is possibly due to the fact that post pandemic females have shown up in the offices more than the males and they agreed to be part of the survey than the males. The age had been segmented into four categories. The highest participation has been observed among the age 31–40 years (36.22%) category. However, the lowest participation is seen among the participants of age above 50 years (12.38%). Similarly, in education as well, the highest participants had bachelor degree (45.82%) while the lowest number of participants had Ph.D degree or other certifications or diplomas which made 26.93%.

TABLE 1 | Demographics analysis.

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	110	34.05%
Female	213	65.94%
Age (years)		
20 – 30	114	35.29%
31 – 40	117	36.22%
41 – 50	52	16.09%
Above 50	40	12.38%
Education		
Bachelor	142	45.82%
Master	94	29.10%
Ph.D. and other studies	87	26.93%

N = 323. Other studies refer to diploma, certification or affiliation.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Measurement Model

Figure 2 explains he measurement model of the analysis. It can be seen in the following.

Results obtained through the **Figure 2** are given in the **Table 2**. According to Bollen (2019), the factor loadings for the items of each variable are considered satisfactory if they are above 0.6. Results obtained for this research show that all the values obtained for factor loadings are above the criteria mentioned. The minimum factor loading obtained in this research is for 0.676 which is for the item EBE4. The variance inflation factor (VIF) is a collinearity diagnostic mostly used by the researchers. According to Salmerón et al. (2018), its values should be below 5.5 so to not have the issue of multicollinearity in the data. In this research, all the values are found below the maximum criteria. The maximum value of VIF obtained in this research is 4.6 hence not showing any indications for multicollinearity.

Cronbach alpha and composite reliabilities have been used in this research to check the construct reliability. In order to show the internal consistency in the data, Taber (2018) says that the value of Cronbach alpha and composite reliability should be above 0.7. In this research, all the values for the Cronbach and composite reliability are above these criteria. The lowest value for the Cronbach alpha obtained is 0.833 for the variable enterprise performance, hence showing the internal consistency of the variables. The next indicator for the convergent validity of the data used in this research is average variance extracted (AVE). According to Shrestha (2021), value of AVE above 0.5 indicates the occurrence of convergent validity in the data. In this research, the values obtained for AVE are above this criterion. The minimum value obtained for AVE is 0.54 for the variable employee brand equity which shows that the present research meets the criteria of convergent validity.

The present research has also checked the discriminant validity of the scales using Fornell and Larcker criterion and HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) ratio. Results of these tests are reported in the **Table 3**. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the scales are said to be valid if the highest value in the test is at the top of each column. It can be seen in **Table 3** that 0.738 is the highest value in the column of employee brand equity. Hence, the results indicate that scales show discriminant validity. The second measure is the HTMT ratio. According

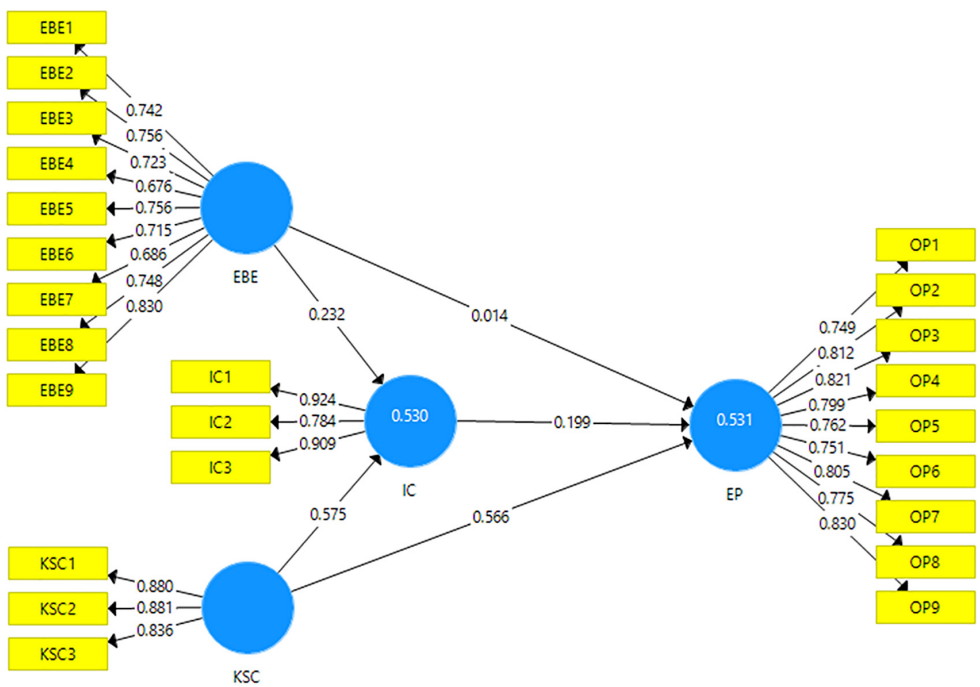

FIGURE 2 | Measurement model. EBE, employee brand equity, KSC, knowledge sharing culture, IC, innovative capabilities, EP, enterprise performance.

TABLE 2 | Measurement model assessment.

Variables	Factor loadings		VIF	Construct reliability and validity		
				α	Composite reliability	AVE
Employee brand equity	EBE1	0.742	1.990	0.898	0.915	0.545
	EBE2	0.756	2.720			
	EBE3	0.723	2.473			
	EBE4	0.676	1.614			
	EBE5	0.756	3.765			
	EBE6	0.715	2.944			
	EBE7	0.686	2.827			
	EBE8	0.748	3.940			
	EBE9	0.830	2.889			
Innovative capabilities	IC1	0.924	3.820	0.925	0.937	0.624
	IC2	0.784	1.467			
	IC3	0.909	3.603			
Knowledge sharing culture	KSC1	0.880	2.131	0.843	0.907	0.765
	KSC2	0.881	2.168			
	KSC3	0.836	1.688			
Enterprise performance	OP1	0.749	3.169	0.833	0.900	0.750
	OP2	0.812	4.559			
	OP3	0.821	3.651			
	OP4	0.799	1.983			
	OP5	0.762	4.357			
	OP6	0.751	3.928			
	OP7	0.805	4.632			
	OP8	0.775	3.925			
	OP9	0.830	1.990			

to Franke and Sarstedt (2019), HTMT results are considered significant if the values for the ratio of the correlations between two variables are less than 0.85. The results of the HTMT ratio in **Table 3** show that all the values are less than the described criteria, hence confirming the discriminant validity.

The coefficient of determination (r-square) explains the sustainability of the model fit indicating how much obtained values fit the regression line (Akossou and Palm, 2013). A coefficient of determination near 50% or 0.5 indicates a good model fit. In this research, the dependent variable of enterprise performance shows the r-square of 53.1% and the innovative capability shows the r-square of 53%. This shows that the present model of the research is sustainable and possesses good model fit. The f-square is also an indicator of the model fit checked through the effect size of the variables. According to Selya et al. (2012) the reference value for a small effect size is 0.02, medium effect size is 0.15 and large effect size is declared if the f-square value is 0.35 and above. In this research, large effect size (f-square value) has been seen between knowledge sharing culture and innovative capabilities which is 0.49. Another large effect size is observed between the variable knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance which is 0.32. In addition, small effect sizes have been observed between the variable's employee brand equity and innovative capabilities (f-square = 0.08). Another small effect size is also observed between the variable's innovative capabilities and enterprise performance (f-square = 0.04). Furthermore, the predictive relevance of the variables has also been calculated in this research to endorse the model fit. According to Huang (2018), for predictive relevance to be significant should be above zero. In this research, the q-square values obtained are above zero indicating significant predictive relevance of the variables (enterprise performance = 0.30 and innovative capabilities = 0.38).

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity.

Fornell–Larcker criterion					Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio				
	EBE	EP	IC	KSC		EBE	EP	IC	KSC
EBE	0.738				EBE				
EP	0.433	0.790			EP	0.435			
IC	0.546	0.605	0.874		IC	0.592	0.674		
KSC	0.547	0.714	0.702	0.866	KSC	0.595	0.800	0.838	

EBE, employee brand equity, KSC, knowledge sharing culture, IC, innovative capabilities, EP, enterprise performance.

Structural Model

Figure 3 gives the pictorial elaboration of the structural model which is obtained by running the bootstrapping with 5,000 subsampling. The statistics used for the acceptance of these hypotheses are t-statistics and *p*-values. According to Winship and Zhuo (2020), the acceptance criteria of t-statistics is 1.96 while for *p*-value it should be less than 0.05.

There are total six hypotheses in this study. Four hypotheses are checking the direct effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables. **Table 4** reports the results for the direct effects. The first hypothesis of the research states that employee brand engagement has an effect on enterprise performance. The t-statistics and *p*-value reported for this relationship are ($t = 0.375$; $p = 0.708$), hence rejecting H1. The second hypothesis of the research states knowledge sharing culture has an effect on enterprise performance. The t-statistics and *p*-value reported for this relationship are ($t = 8.125$; $p = 0$), hence accepting H2. The third hypothesis of the research states that employee brand engagement has an effect on innovative capabilities. The t-statistics and *p*-value reported for this relationship are ($t = 4.349$; $p = 0$), hence accepting H3. The fourth hypothesis of the research states that employee brand engagement has an effect on innovative capabilities. The t-statistics and *p*-value reported for this relationship are ($t = 10.105$; $p = 0$), hence accepting H4.

Table 5 reports the results for the indirect effects of the study. The first indirect effect of this research is about innovative capabilities mediate the relationship of employee brand engagement and enterprise performance. The t-statistic and *p*-value reported for this relationship is ($t = 2.169$; $p = 0.031$), hence accepting H5. The second indirect effect of this research is about innovative capabilities mediate the relationship of knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance. The

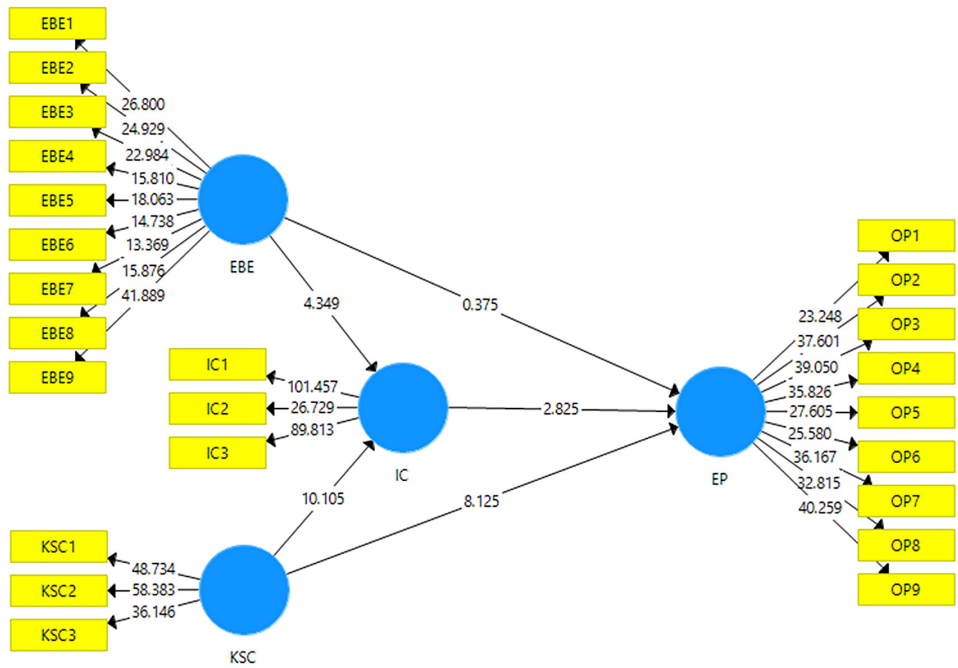

FIGURE 3 | Structural model.

t-statistic and *p*-value reported for this relationship is ($t = 2.959$; $p = 0.003$), hence accepting H6.

DISCUSSION

The gap in the literature was addressed by examining the impact of employee brand engagement and knowledge sharing culture on enterprise performance with the mediation of innovative capabilities. The direct relationships between the variables were examined i.e., the effect of employee brand engagement on enterprise performance, the effect of knowledge sharing culture on enterprise performance, the effect of employee brand engagement on innovative capabilities, and knowledge sharing culture on innovative capabilities. The indirect or mediating effect of innovative capabilities was also analyzed in the present study which states that innovative capabilities mediate the relationship between employee brand engagement and enterprise performance and innovative capabilities mediate the relationship between knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance. The study from the results obtained presented some important insights into the organizational dynamics.

TABLE 4 | Direct effects of the variable.

Paths	H	O	M	SD	T-statistics	*P*-value	Results
EBE - > EP	H_1	0.014	0.016	0.038	0.375	0.708	*Rejected*
KSC - > EP	H_2	0.566	0.572	0.070	8.125	<0.001	*Accepted*
EBE - > IC	H_3	0.232	0.234	0.053	4.349	<0.001	*Accepted*
KSC - > IC	H_4	0.575	0.574	0.057	10.105	<0.001	*Accepted*

EBE, employee brand equity, KSC, knowledge sharing culture, IC, innovative capabilities, EP, enterprise performance.

TABLE 5 | Indirect effects of the variable.

Paths	H	O	M	SD	t-statistics	*P*-value	Results
EBE - > IC - > EP	H_5	0.046	0.046	0.021	2.169	0.031	*Accepted*
KSC - > IC - > EP	H_6	0.115	0.111	0.039	2.959	0.003	*Accepted*

EBE, employee brand equity, KSC, knowledge sharing culture, IC, innovative capabilities, EP, enterprise performance.

The first hypothesis posited that employee brand engagement has an effect on enterprise performance. The results of this hypothesis revealed that the relationship between employee brand engagement and enterprise performance is insignificant. These findings were contrary to the findings of Anwar and Abdullah (2021) who found that employee training and engagement had a strong influence on organizational performance. The possible reason could be that employee brand engagement cannot directly contribute to organizational performance without the presence of any other employee-related or organizational-related factor. The second hypothesis got accepted which posited that a knowledge-sharing culture has an effect on enterprise performance. Meher et al. (2022) found similar results which revealed that the knowledge-sharing ability of the employees develops the capability to attain a competitive advantage. Knowledge is an important asset for the organization, thus promoting a culture of knowledge sharing not only develops the interpersonal skills of the employees but also the firm's performance.

The third hypothesis posited that employee brand engagement has an effect on innovative capabilities. The results of this

hypothesis revealed that the relationship between employee brand engagement and innovative capabilities is significant. These results are in harmony with the findings of Paillé and Valéau (2020) who revealed that employee engagement in the organization enables the employees to work effectively for the organization by learning something new, developing innovative skills, and saving organizational resources. The reason is the ability of engaged employees to work effectively for the organization by developing innovative skills and capabilities. The fourth hypothesis got accepted which posited that a knowledge-sharing culture has an effect on innovative capabilities. Similar results were found by Halisah et al. (2020) who revealed that the knowledge-sharing culture encourages the employees to be innovative in terms of the propensity to devise innovative strategies to create novel products. Innovative capabilities are built when employees receive knowledge from their peers and colleagues, thus knowledge management culture is important for developing innovative behavior.

The fifth hypothesis got accepted which posited that innovative capabilities mediate the relationship between employee brand engagement and enterprise performance. These results are synchronous with the findings obtained by Al-Kurdi et al. (2020) who stated that innovative capabilities of the employees as a result of employee engagement make the employees do their job beyond their responsibilities. This results in better organizational performance and achieving a competitive advantage in the fierce business market. The reason is innovative capabilities are developed as a result of high employee brand engagement and these factors together enhance the overall performance of the enterprise. The sixth hypothesis also got accepted which posited that innovative capabilities mediate the relationship between knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance. These results are in synchrony with the findings of Suchitra et al. (2020) who claimed that the culture of the organization matters to a great extent when it comes to developing innovative behavior and improving organizational performance. Organizations that encourage a knowledge-sharing culture induce innovative capabilities of the employees which result in better organizational performance.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS, PRACTICAL IMPLICATION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION, AND CONCLUSION

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes significantly to the theory of organizational behavior and performance management. Firstly, the role of employee brand equity in the enterprise performance and innovative capabilities has been examined. Such setting of variables has not been examined before; hence, this study has significantly contributed to the management literature. Secondly, this research has found that employee brand equity does not play any role in the enterprise performance; rather it significantly impacts the innovative capabilities of the organizations. The literature has also been enriched by examining the role of knowledge sharing culture in enterprise performance and innovative capabilities. Thirdly, it has been found that knowledge sharing culture plays significant role in improving the enterprise performance through encouraging the innovative capabilities. This research has also explored the mediating role of innovative capabilities between the knowledge sharing culture, employee brand equity and the enterprise performance. Consequently, this research is vital as it gives insight into the role of knowledge sharing culture, innovative capabilities and employee brand equity in overall enterprise's performance.

Practical Implications

This research gives some solid practical implications for the organizations and corporate sector based on the findings of the study. Firstly, it is important for the organizations in corporate sector and software houses in information technology sector to encourage the knowledge sharing culture to enhance their overall enterprise performance. The study has shown that when the knowledge sharing culture prevails in the organizations, performance of the enterprise's flourishes. Secondly, when the employees owning brand equity work for organizations, it helps them nourish the innovative capabilities of the organizations through empowering the coworkers by engaging them with productive processes. The human resource department can then decide whether the branded employee should be paid extra for this extra role behavior and to retain them. Similarly, there lies a responsibility with the organizations and the human resource department to avail the maximum skills of the employee brand equity by creating the opportunities for the other employees through training sessions where the elite employees share their experiences. Furthermore, this study will help the top management of the organizations to invest in the employee brand equity by hiring them for the betterment of the organizational overall environment because it supports in the enhancement of the innovative capabilities which ultimately contribute to the performance of the enterprise.

Limitations and Recommendations

This research has been carried out in the information technology sector, considering the role of employee brand equity and knowledge sharing culture in the enterprise performance with mediation of innovative capabilities. The current study has used the sample of employees working in the software houses which limits the findings of the study. This research is based on the conceptual understanding of the researcher which opens new avenues for exploring other dimensions in different dynamics therefore, it can be checked in other working setups like construction industry, manufacturing industry or assembling industry can also be considered to get more insight into the conceptual model. This study can yield more interesting results if conducted in the European setting where wages and the labor laws are different from China that how employee brand equity plays its part in enterprise performance and innovative capabilities. Therefore, it is encouraged to explore more aspects to discuss the framework and findings of this research that will enlighten

and validate the aforementioned relationships. Hence, empirical testing of the proposed framework is encouraged by introducing other important mediating factors like emotional intelligence, employee absorptive capacity or moral disengagement or the moderating variables like gender, employee well being. It will also be interesting to check the impact of employee brand equity and knowledge sharing culture in producing the employee ambassadorship in organizational setting.

CONCLUSION

Enterprise performance is the most critical element for the organizations. Therefore, organizations keep on finding new ways and devise means to enhance their performance. In this study, certain determinants have been found that are important for the organizations in enhancing their performance. In present study, the role of employee brand equity and knowledge sharing culture has been examined in enterprise performance. Further, the mediating role of innovative capability has also been checked. Results of this research have described that employee brand equity does not play a role in the enterprise performance; however, knowledge sharing culture is an important determinant of the enterprise performance. The structural equation modeling also revealed that innovative capability significantly mediates the relationship of employee brand equity with enterprise performance; and the relationship of knowledge sharing culture and enterprise performance. It also offers a significant contribution to the literature by testing a comprehensive model on the employee brand equity and enterprise performance in the organizational setting in China. There are some implications as well for the human resource departments of the organizations in catering the branded employees by offering extra compensations for their extra role behaviors they exhibit in the organization in the form of innovative capabilities.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Mediating Role of Customer Value Co-creation and Internal Branding Between Brand Orientation and Brand Performance: Moderating Effect of Enterprise Innovative Capabilities-Evidence From Agri Product Users

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There has been a rejuvenated interest from researchers and scholars regarding the various ways in which organizations can enhance their overall brand performance. Enterprise brand orientation are said to be the main factors that aid in improving brand performance along with internal branding and the customer value co-creation. To assess this relationship, the present study undertook an inquiry to investigate the impact of enterprise brand orientation on brand performance. Moreover, the mediating roles of customer value co-creation and internal branding were also studied. Data was obtained from 358 Chinese consumers of various household, electronic, and textile goods through a self-administered survey. A SEM technique was applied using Smart-PLS to examine the data. The findings suggested that enterprise brand orientation had a significant effect on brand performance. Moreover, it was also observed that internal branding and customer value co-creation also had a predicting role in brand performance. In addition to this, customer value co-creation and internal branding were seen to be strongly mediating the relationships between enterprise brand orientation and brand performance. The study also checked the moderating role of enterprise innovative capabilities on the effect on enterprise brand orientation and brand performance. The theoretical implication entailed the value addition made by the current study in expanding the knowledge on the predictors of enterprise brand equity. The practical implication outlined the steps that could be taken by organizations to improve brand performance through enterprise brand orientation; internal branding and customer value co-creation so that customer satisfaction and enterprise brand performance could be enhanced.

Keywords: enterprise brand orientation, customer value co-creation, internal branding, enterprise innovative capabilities, brand performance

INTRODUCTION

Branding has been considered as one of the most successful strategies of the marketing science. According to brand management studies, a good brand provides various strategic benefits such as brand expansion, recommendations, high revenues, and a better customer commitment to the corporate organizations. There has been given very little attention to assess the impact of firm branding on economic and financial performance (Seyedghorban et al., 2016). For enterprises, economic performance is vital because it is an indicator of their branding value. Therefore, firms try to evaluate the impacts of branding initiatives on their economic performance. Limited operational and financial resources of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the critical contributors of lower economic performance (Hirvonen et al., 2016).

Brands are considered as valuable assets of corporate sector and are helpful in proving the worth of companies. Due to the branding approach, companies become able to charge greater paybacks from their consumers. Therefore, it is not surprising that enterprises aim to establish powerful brands. A lot of research on company's brand management is addressed from the standpoint of the consumer (Urde, 2016). Researchers have only recently begun to pay attention to product marketing from an organizational perspective. From an organizational view, the literature on brand management focuses on strategic brand management, brand orientation (BO) and internal branding (IB; Piehler et al., 2016). These three elements are considered as strong pillars of improving brand performance but hardly a connection between them has been studied so far.

The role of employees and the enterprise's efforts to harmonize their employees with brand identities, i.e., internal branding in the enterprise's brand strategic approach, has not been adequately examined (Tavassoli et al., 2014). Enterprises are increasingly using branding as a tactic to get a competitive advantage. In this context, Intel Corporation has now been able to earn higher amounts of money than its competitors due to its extensive branding activities (Chang et al., 2021). Therefore, recent research has urged business leaders to focus on building a BO throughout their organizations. This may occur when branding is considered as a strategic imperative. Despite the current literature's interest in enterprise branding, our understanding is still constrained in a few areas of organizational management (Lee et al., 2019).

To prove this notion, many business owners are hesitant to adopt BO because it does not necessarily result in instant financial rewards. Business sector companies mainly focus on long-term relationship marketing but the impact of enterprise BO on long-term firm performance is somewhat understudied (Ben Youssef et al., 2018). In the context of business management, there is a need to understand that branding really has a scope in ensuring the long-term relationship marketing (Leek and Christodoulides, 2012). This is not studied before, so to fill this research gap, the current study examines the long-term effects of enterprise BO on enterprise brand performance while controlling short-term financial rewards.

There are certain concerns of buyers toward the companies like expected prices and regular interactions with manufacturers. More research is needed to properly comprehend how BO influences brand performance. It is based on the above stated concerns of customers (Guo et al., 2017). Another concern which needs to be addressed is whether all sorts of buyers have the same perception of their suppliers' BO or not. The corporate structure of firms, particularly state ownership, is a crucial situational factor that has been overlooked by prior studies. State-owned companies tend to have more capabilities than the private ones due to set rules and regulations of operations. Research suggests that they may have different demands than private firms (An et al., 2021; Avotra et al., 2021; Yingfei et al., 2021).

Enterprise's BO have gotten a lot of attention in organizational studies. This is partly true because they support management decisions of corporate sector. If enterprise's BO is effectively managed then it helps organizations to achieve higher performance. Previous studies in brand management have shown that businesses with a high level of BO, outperform than those having a lower BO (Odoom, 2016). Certain external and internal conditions function as controlling factors in enterprises' promotion of BO (Odoom and Mensah, 2019). Moreover, it was discovered that extrinsic factors impact the BO of enterprises and direct the performance of businesses (Odoom and Mensah, 2019).

Scholars have argued that the competitive aspect of corporate firms may diminish the direct performance impact of individual orientations. This thing also focused on use of interconnections between firms to create synergistic outcomes. Likewise, the research is divided as to whether enterprises should or should not explore several orientations in addition to their strengths. Research also emphasized on how an effort would improve their future performance (Laukkanen et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2022). Brand orientation seems to be an approach to develop a company's brand, but it can also help with other aspects of the business, such as financial success. The indirect influence of BO on economic success has been described in recent literature. As an example, researchers discovered that BO had an indirect effect on financial performance through brand performance (Urde, 2016).

A few researchers have demonstrated that corporate branding can improve economic performance through the market performance of business organizations. These findings support the theory that a company's strategic orientation can only increase its business performance by improving its organizational efficiency (Reijonen et al., 2015). According to studies, brands assist enterprises in a variety of ways, including boosting market performance, raising quality views of their offerings, and enabling premium pricing tactics. Surprisingly, many brand managers are unaware of the strategic importance of corporate branding. Resultantly, they are unable to embrace brand strategies meaning that they do not consider enterprise branding to be a key part of their marketing plans (Urde, 2016). According to a research, business executives may be unaware of the process that connects branding initiatives to firm performance (Leek and Christodoulides, 2012). The scientific literature on enterprise BO has found that it has both positive and negative implications on firm performance (Brexendorf et al., 2015). During current

times, the innovation side of businesses has been promoted as a set of complementary competencies that are great for branding. Regardless of the effectiveness of strategic competencies, literature has revealed that their complementing benefits are equivocal and not consistent between organizations (Odoom and Mensah, 2019). It is also evident from the literature that the BO of enterprises is not only directly related to brand performance, but also requires indirect ways such as IB (Chang et al., 2018; Iyer et al., 2018).

There is an assumption of IB that employees are the human capital of an organization. Their talents and expertise could be exploited to offer a sustained competitive advantage for firms. This assumption underpins the relevance of the function of IB in promoting brand performance (Iyer et al., 2018). Workers are also seen as brand advocates because their activities are critical to the successful implementation of brand strategy. Employees' contributions to a brand's performance are also congruent with corporate branding research. The ambition and commitment of stakeholders to carry out the brand image are critical for the establishment of a strong brand identity (Iyer et al., 2018). Human capital and employee expertise can provide essential foundation of competition in the long run. It is also evident in the case of organizational and brand performance. Internal branding is valued in management research especially, on an interpersonal basis. It lays an emphasis on the psychological perspective (Morokane et al., 2016). It is critical to understand IB from an individual perspective but it helps in assessing the influence of IB on a company's overall effectiveness. However, there is a scarcity of research on the origins and implications of internal branding at the organizational level (Hermundsdottir and Aspelund, 2021). The current study investigates the effect of IB in supporting enterprise BO and brand performance along with a mediating effect of customer value co-creation in businesses to improve long-term brand success. Consumers are dynamic now-a-days, not just in terms of their ever-changing needs, but also in terms of their responsibilities. Their responsibilities can range from demanding product or service from companies and add in customer value co-creation (Tuan, 2017).

Consumers of different businesses have also shown the ability of value co-creation. In this context, Intel has improved its brand image as an enterprise component provider by collaborating with computer hardware makers and assemblers to create value that is visible through their products (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). Furthermore, the importance of customers to a company is determined by their level of attachment with the company. They regard themselves as partial members of the organizations (Tuan, 2017). They see themselves as partial members of the organization rather than as visitors. Having said that, customer-enterprise identification is defined as the degree to which consumers connect with and are dedicated to the business, which may have an impact on customers' value co-creation behavior. It ultimately improves the brand performance (Tuan, 2017). Conversely, several gaps related to the research literature are currently visible and provide an attraction for scholastic attention and effort. To begin with, existing literature related to BO reveals a little about how its interactions with firm capabilities affect brand performance (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). Secondly, there is no empirical evidence of differences in these kinds of correlations across corporate firms in the literature. Moreover, the objective support from businesses is frequently overlooked and the BO literature appears to be scarce (Bang et al., 2016). All these gaps could have been filled by going deep into the prospects of research for brand performance. Therefore, with these objectives, current research tried to find the possible association between enterprise brand orientation with brand performance. Based on the significance and mediating roles of customer value co-creation and internal branding suggested by Chang et al. (2018) and Iyer et al. (2018), were utilized as mediators of this study. This study also evaluated the moderating effects of enterprise innovative capabilities for brand performance.

THEORETICAL BASIS FOR HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The resource-based view (RBV): According to RBV, a company can obtain a competitive edge by having a match between its unique core competencies and the dynamic environment (Barney, 1991). Companies obtain splendid market positioning since each firm utilizes a distinct variety of services and competencies. The company must have assets which are valuable, unique, and incapable of being imitated or substituted (Barney, 2014). Whatever a company can update or improve is regarded as a resource. Therefore, resources might be actual or immaterial, and having access to them can provide a competitive advantage. While Barney establishes four conditions for developing a long-term competitive edge but enterprises can only fulfill a fraction of each criterion in practice (Barney, 1991).

A brand is one such resource of a company and is therefore given importance (Barney, 1991). Several academics feel that well-developed and maintained brands are significant corporate assets. Strong brands are unique, difficult to replicate, and can strengthen a firm's performance. They can help firms establish a durable competitive edge (Fine et al., 2016). The previous study has used RBV to better understand how the brand management strategy and processes work in an organization (Baumgarth et al., 2013). The importance of IB to establish and maintain performance in the marketplace is also explained through RBV in this study. From an organizational point, the following section gives a quick survey of the literature on brand management.

Human resources, organizational learning, and intangible resources have all been emphasized as important factors in improving an organization's performance by a number of academics (Gerhart and Feng, 2021). Based on this body of evidence, authors believe that BO is important but not sufficient for generating successful brand performance. In order to succeed, human resources (i.e., internal branding) are required. This research also gets support from upper-echelon theory (Hambrick, 2007). The theory basically provides insights about top management approaches which in this study shape the enterprise BO leading to brand performance. This theory is generally

related to management, practices, characteristics and quality of services provided by the top management for brand performance. Therefore, this theory provided the foundation for enterprise BO which deals with all these aspects.

This research is also supported by the Dynamic capability theory (DCT; Teece, 2007) which lays foundations for enterprise innovation capabilities in achieving the brand performance of the enterprises. Firms develop numerous capabilities which allow them to harness and adapt existing processes and resources to accomplish business goals. Such capabilities or procedures also assist businesses in shaping their orientations to remain competitive in the face of changing market and industry situations (Odoom and Mensah, 2019). Brand orientation is also supported by this dynamic capabilities theory because of the fact that such orientation leads to improved brand performance through dynamic capabilities. Furthermore, DCT is used to explain the relationship between enterprise BOs and brand performance. In contrast to current mainstream RBV's value appropriation/capture focus, DCT is an advancement of RBV with a specific concentration on innovation/value creation (Katkalo et al., 2010). Dynamic capabilities are defined as a company's ability to address issues in an effective manner, as defined by its ability to detect possibilities and challenges, make effective business decisions, and modify its resource base. Growing market resources are also added with dynamic capabilities. As a result, one significant consequence of the concept of dynamic capabilities is that businesses compete not just in terms of their capacity to exploit current resources and capabilities, but also in terms of their ability to discover different resources and generate new capabilities (Teece, 2007; Tuan, 2017).

Enterprise Brand Orientation and Brand Performance

Brand orientation is a systematic approach where the brand would become the focal point around which the organization's processes are developed *via* stakeholder connections. As the investigations by Anees-ur-Rehman et al. (2018) show that this is intimately linked to business development and financial performance. Since the year 2000, the theoretical growth of this notion has been rising, expanding to various extensions (Sepulcri et al., 2020). Few academics developed a theoretical framework of antecedent factors of brand orientations in that sector, while Ewing and Napoli (2005) produced a scale to validate the use of nonprofit brand orientation.

Furthermore, Liu et al. (2017) discovered a positive association among brand orientation and branding mechanisms, corroborating the concept that a brand orientation strategy helps employees understand their role inside an organization. Urde (2016) coined the term brand orientation in his research study. He claimed that there have been three key forces driving companies to become more brand-oriented. Product heterogeneity is reducing, communication costs are rising, and marketplaces are becoming more integrated. Toward becoming brand-oriented, companies must spend their energy on adding value to existing brands by integrating their branding operations and making branding a greater priority on the top leadership's agenda (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). In general, companies that establish a BO, see brands as crucial for their performance. Resultantly, corporations are prepared to invest time and money in their branding efforts. Closer relationships with customers result in higher levels of loyalty and cooperation, and higher levels of customer satisfaction. Loyalty results from greater trust and devotion and the ability to deliver more brand value leads to increased purchase intentions. Advancement of the stronger brand image and all these stated values are all advantages of BO (Chang et al., 2018). Superior brand image translates to increased brand value which influences buyers' willingness to pay a premium price. Companies may gain from premium pricing by building a strong brand due to the price-inelastic nature of corporate buying (Ozdemir et al., 2020).

In conclusion, possessing a BO attitude enables firms to focus on ways to accomplish distinctiveness while eliminating behaviors that could devalue a business in the long run (e.g., price promotions (Wong and Merrilees, 2007). Corporations can plan and build practices that will improve long-term brand value by adopting a BO attitude. A brand-oriented attitude emphasizes the necessity of developing and maintaining a strong brand identity through time. To put it another way, BO helps to improve the internal components of corporate branding (Urde, 2016). According to prior research, possessing a BO perspective has a favorable impact on organizational or brand performance (Lee et al., 2016). All this leads to improved brand performance. Therefore, the author constructed the following hypothesis.

> *H1*: Enterprise brand orientation has an effect on brand performance.

Customer Value Co-creation

The decision-making processes of customers about purchase have been a focus of customer behavior research. It is considered that customers are more than just responders. They are also active value providers. Consumers have always been co-creators of value in the service-dominant logic. Consumers co-create value only with the firm by engaging throughout the full service-value chain as active members and cooperative collaborators in relational exchanges. Customers participate actively in the delivery of services and the fulfillment of their benefits (co-creation of value; Lee et al., 2016). Certain customers may be involved in tasks which have historically been considered organizational responsibilities like self-service, recommendations for better services, and sometimes even co-designing. Thus, customers can be characterized as part-time workers of the organization (Lee et al., 2016).

Value co-creation is accomplished in service-dominant logic through the integration of resources. Value realized from integration of resources *via* activities and interactions between contributors in the customer's network infrastructure is how customer value co-creation is characterized. Customer participation activity and customer citizenship behavior are two higher-order variables that makeup customer value co-creation behavior. Information searching, sharing of information, appropriate behavior, and personal interaction

are all examples of customer involvement behavior, which is seen as required (in-role) behavior for successful value co-creation (Lee et al., 2016). Customers are looking for guidance on how to carry out their roles as value co-creators (Yi and Gong, 2013). Consumers must also exchange information and other resources to be used in value co-creation activities. Consumers should be accountable, cooperate, follow practices and regulations, and follow guidance by staff in order to successfully co-create value with the employees of the company. Personal engagement between customers and workers is also required for effective value co-creation (Lee et al., 2016). Customer participation on the other hand, is an optional (extra-role) action that adds significant value to the organization, and it is not needed necessarily for value co-creation (Yi and Gong, 2013).

Critique, campaigning, assistance, and compassion are examples of this style of behavior. Customers supply employees with both solicited and unsolicited information, which allows employees and the business to enhance the service production process over time. Advocacy denotes a commitment to the organization and advancement of the company's objectives over the interests of individual customers. Assisting refers to customer action that is geared at helping other customers in the setting of value co-creation. Finally, patience requires compassion and understanding on the part of the client in the event of poor service delivery that falls short of the customer's expectations (Zhao et al., 2018).

Brand-conscious companies are more likely to recognize the importance of involving consumers in their branding strategy (Reijonen et al., 2015). The market offers in enterprise branding are frequently a mix of services and professional products. Customers are frequently encouraged to participate in the development of customized services. Whenever a company prioritizes brand (i.e., brand-orientation), it will be more ready to invest resources in creating and delivering higher brand value to its customers. Client customization and engagement are efficient methods to achieve this (Chang et al., 2018). Therefore, enterprise BO could influence customer value co-creation for the branding performance. It suggests a mediating role of customer value co-creating in improving brand performance of the companies. Companies can better understand consumer expectations and improve their marketing effectiveness/efficiency by involving customers in the value co-creation process. Furthermore, value co-creation improves shared knowledge of the brand's worth. Consumers who actively participate in valuable co-creation initiatives are also more likely to be loyal to the partnership. Consumers are likely to provide timely feedback to suppliers when they participate in value co-creation, allowing them to promptly address possible difficulties and help improve business performance (Yi and Gong, 2013). As a result, it is expected that value co-creation will lead to improved brand performance. Based on all this supporting literature, the authors developed the following hypothesis.

H2: Enterprise brand orientation has an effect on customer value co-creation.

H3: Customer value co-creation has an effect on brand performance.

H6: Customer value co-creation mediates the relationship of enterprise brand orientation and brand performance.

Internal Branding

To achieve branding goals, businesses must rely on their staff. To make sure that employees as well as the enterprise operate equally for firm's brand values, all members of the organization must agree on the brand-building aspirations (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). Such a strategy necessitates a firm-wide effort to guarantee that everybody including upper executives and the forward employees upholds and strengthens the company's credibility. Such concerted effort necessitates a proper knowledge of what a brand is and what it implies for a company's performance all across the board. As a result, businesses should educate and train all of their employees so that they fully understand and appreciate the company's brand performance. Internal branding refers to an entire process (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018).

Internal business practices through which workers grasp the branding strategy and engage with the business embody the brand. This is how internal branding is characterized. Internal branding may have been a powerful technique for aligning a company's brand ideals with the values of its employees (Urde, 2016). Enterprises must take the initiative and develop mechanisms that allow for corporate brand value transmission. Internal branding could assist employees in effectively expressing their firm's objectives and communicating the brand values to customers (Matanda and Ndubisi, 2013). When internal branding is done well, there is a significant level of consistency between the values of the company and the ideals of its workers. Such internal branding can boost brand performance (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). The goal of BO is to create a strong brand by maintaining brand identity during interactions between various stakeholders. Employee engagement and participation in the development and protection of the company's brands are actively sought in brand-oriented workplace culture (M'zungu et al., 2017). The corporate branding plan is implemented through a thorough brand management approach. It includes internal branding which improves workers' comprehension of the brand values. Resultantly, through a powerful internal branding process, employees can experience the brand when they begin to appreciate the branding concept and swear allegiance to it. The more brand-focused a company's culture is the more successful its internal branding would be. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2016) found that in enterprise branding, BO has a significant positive link with internal branding.

Based on the foregoing discourse, internal branding is indeed an important organizational activity in the overall management of brands. It also ensures that employees are motivated to carry out the brand objectives and strategic brand management procedures to increase long-term brand equity. Internal branding is important since the brand value is co-created by customers, and impressions are formed. It happens every time when interested parties and workers engage. According to Ind (2014),

brand effective and efficient management seems to be an evolving thing in which employees play a critical part in putting brand ideas into action. As a result, authors first claim that internal branding has a favorable impact on a firm's brand performance. In addition to the link between internal branding and brand success, past research has suggested that internal branding seems to be a result of BO. For something like a brand-oriented enterprise to develop and convey brand-related objectives all across the organization, internal branding is required. Employer branding could improve employee retention, boost employee happiness, and lower-wage aspirations (Tavassoli et al., 2014). Each of these characteristics would increase motivation to strive more toward the brand's/objectives, resulting in improved performance. Meanwhile, internal branding serves as a link here between strategic brand management strategy and brand performance by allowing an organization's staff to concentrate on executing the brand's long-term ambitions (Iyer et al., 2018). All this literature support leads to the following hypothesis.

H4: Enterprise brand orientation has an effect on internal branding.

H5: Internal branding has an effect on brand performance.

H7: Internal branding mediates the relationship of enterprise brand orientation and brand performance.

Enterprise Innovative Capabilities

The extent to which a company's brands, operations, and activities differ from product offerings, facilities, and technology is referred to as innovation. Several arguments and corroboration have already been offered in academia to support the idea that innovation ability is linked to company's brand performance. Some scholars reiterate that Innovation capabilities of enterprises allows businesses to create distinctive processes and brands to acquire a competitive edge (Odoom and Mensah, 2019). Furthermore, Tajeddini et al. (2020) indicate that organizations might increase their brand competency by focusing on technological innovation and product innovation systems. Considering the paucity of data on the topic, the impact of branding and innovation complementarities on corporate performance cannot be overstated (Brexendorf et al., 2015).

According to the research, significant concentrations of innovation capabilities aid brand-oriented organizations in developing strong brands and brand assets. Additionally, branding protects, and business inventions against replication by competitors allow the firms to readily regulate risk and adapt swiftly to market developments (Brexendorf et al., 2015). Ballantyne and Aitken (2007) discovered that branding in organizations moderates the association between innovation and overall sales. From these examples, one could deduce that branding and innovation capabilities appear to act in tandem, supporting their strategic alignment.

Additionally, innovativeness emphasizes the re-invention of an organization's processes. It also helps the development of better mechanisms by enhancing their operational adaptability. Resultantly, it is feasible to assert that process innovation affects all functional and operational areas of businesses. Innovation can also result in a significant reduction in the cost and complexity of manufacturing. This results in superior product quality, better delivery methods, a stronger brand strength, enhanced competitive advantages, and improved business performance (Maldonado-Guzmán et al., 2018). As a result of the preceding debate, the following hypothesis was established in this research. A conceptual framework is developed based on the hypothesis and literature support (see **Figure 1**).

H8: Enterprise innovative capability has a moderating effect for brand performance.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the various methods that were adopted to investigate the impact of employee efficiency and enterprise innovation on enterprise brand equity. Moreover, the mediating role of customer satisfaction was also studied. Based on the underlying objectives of the study, the research hypotheses were formulated and assessed using a deductive inquiry method. A quantitative research design was used by the researcher to eliminate the occurrence of any biases and to maintain the reliability and integrity of the data. The process of data collection was carried out with the help of survey forms that were administered to the respondents of the study. The rationality of the data was ensured by analyzing the survey form for clarity and precision. Five hundred survey forms were disbursed to the participants of the study. The population of the study was comprised of consumers who were engaged in the purchase of various household goods, electronics, and textile items. The geographical setting of the study was based in China and the unit of analysis for this study was individual.

The process of data collection was completed within 3 weeks and out of the 500 originally distributed survey forms, 358 were properly filled and returned. One hundred forty-two forms were deemed as unusable and hence discarded. Therefore, the overall response rate was 71.6%which was satisfactory as per the standards of research. The collected data was later arranged and evaluated through a specialized statistical tool. The sample size was determined using a non-probabilistic convenience sampling method. This method was selected mainly because of the fact that it significantly facilitated the researcher to obtain data within a short time and in a cost-effective manner (Scholtz and Scholtz, 2021).

Statistical Tool

The Smart-PLS 3.3.3 software was used to examine and investigate the validity of the proposed hypotheses. Through, this software, a structural equation modeling (SEM) method was applied to determine the relationships between the constructs of the study. This tool was used because it aids the researcher to develop a path model that helps in effectively analyzing the data (Dar et al., 2022; Nawaz et al., 2022). The path models consist of the measurement and structural models. The measurement

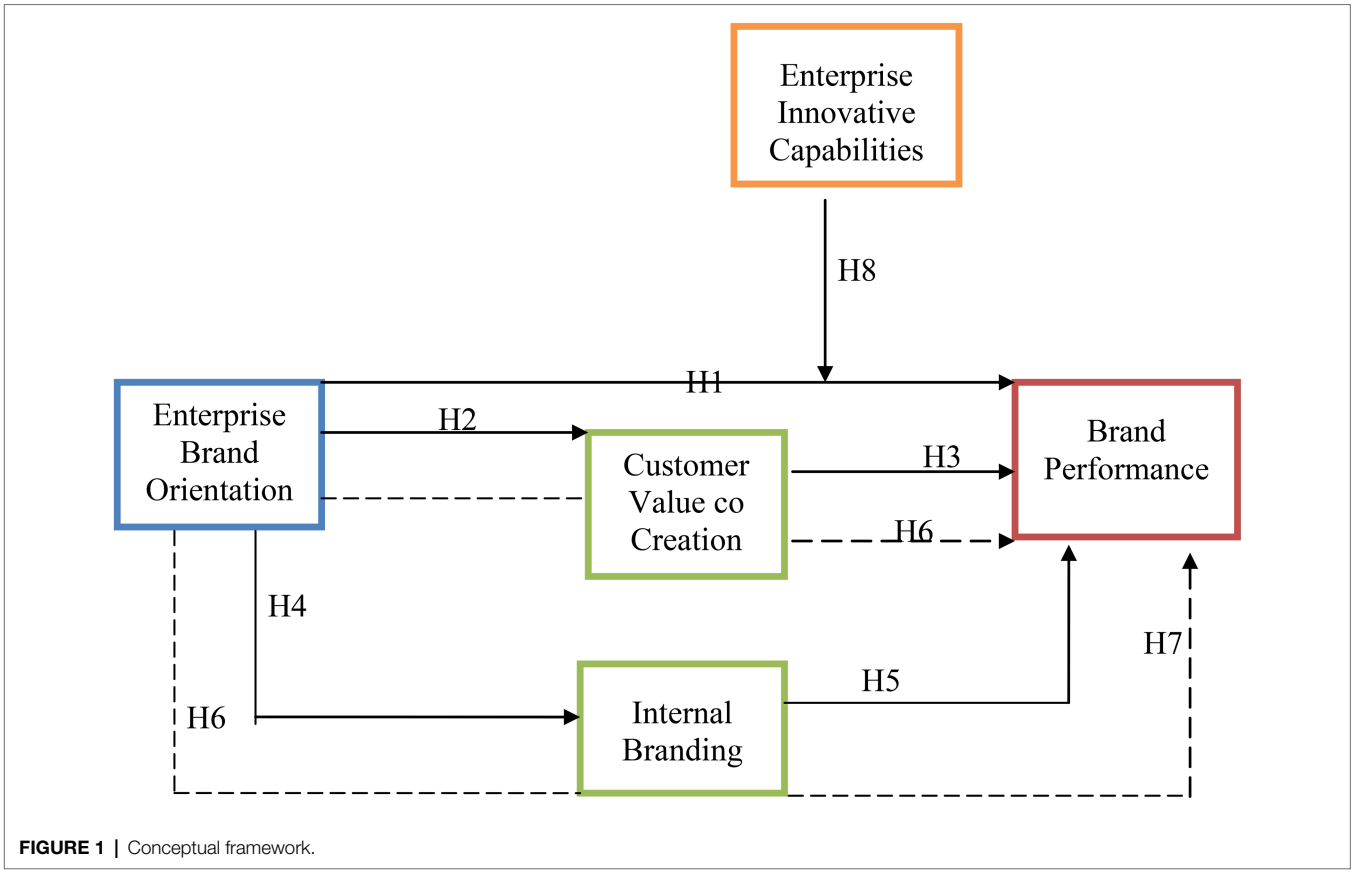

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework.

model confirms the validity of the data whereas, the structural model assesses the relationships between the constructs using t-statistics and *p*-values as key indicators.

Measurement

The measurement scales were adopted from renowned databases and studies having a similar context. A five-point Likert scale was used to obtain responses from the participants. The scale of enterprise BO had six items and it was adopted from Anees-ur-Rehman et al. (2018). There were six items in the scale of internal branding and it was adopted from Anees-ur-Rehman et al. (2018). Furthermore, the scale of customer value co-creation consisted of four items and it was adopted from Chang et al. (2018). There were five items in the scale of brand performance and it was adopted (Chang et al., 2018). Lastly, the scale of enterprise innovative capabilities had five items and it was adopted from Odoom and Mensah (2019).

Demographic Profile

The assessment of the various demographic traits of the participants can be viewed in **Table 1**. It can be seen that there were 156 males (43.5%) and 202 females (56.4%) who agreed to be a part of this study. Moreover, 58 individuals were aged between 20 to 30 years, 115 belonged to the age group of 31 to 40 years, 107 were from the 41 to 50 years age group, and 78 individuals were above 50 years of age. Furthermore, it can also be observed that 131 participants had a Bachelor's education, 150 had a Master's education, and 77 participants had a Ph.D. or some other qualification.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Measurement Model

The visual representation of the results of the measurement model can be seen in **Figure 2**. The figure denotes the relationships between the various constructs of the study.

A detailed evaluation of the outcome of the direct model can be seen in **Table 2**. The table denotes the values of factor loadings, VIF, Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability, and AVE. The factor loadings against each construct item can be seen. Bollen (2019) suggested that the acceptable values of factor loadings should be higher than 0.70. It can be seen that all factor loadings fall within the range of 0.733 and 0.913. Hence, all factor loadings can be considered acceptable. Furthermore, Hair et al. (2017) argued that the desirable VIF values should be <5. It can be observed that the highest VIF value was 3.91. Therefore, it can be deduced that all VIF values were satisfactory. Based on these observations, it can be assumed that collinearity did not exist within the data set.

The reliability of data was evaluated using the measures of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. The Cronbach's alpha values are denoted by "α" and they should be above 0.70 (Nawaz et al., 2021). It can be seen that enterprise brand

orientation had a Cronbach alpha of 0.902, brand performance had an alpha value of 0.912, internal branding had an alpha reading of 0.936, whereas the alpha reading of customer value co-creation was 0.913. Therefore, it can be deduced that all items were internally consistent. The composite reliability was used to assess the reliability of the data set. Peterson and Kim (2013) suggested that the desirable values of composite reliability must be above 0.70. The table depicts that all values of composite reliability were above 0.70. Hence, it can be concluded that the data set was reliable. The convergent validity was assessed through the AVE values. Shrestha (2021) posited that it is desirable that the AVE values must be higher than 0.50. It was observed that all AVE values were within the range of 0.671 and 0.793. Consequently, it can be safely assumed that convergent validity existed within the data.

TABLE 1 | Demographics analysis.

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	156	43.5%
Female	202	56.4%
Age (years)		
20–30	58	16.2%
31–40	115	32.1%
41–50	107	29.8%
Above 50	58	16.2%
Education		
Bachelors	131	36.5%
Masters	150	41.8%
Ph.D. and others	77	21.5%

N = 319.

Table 3 given below presents the outcome of the tests that were undertaken to assess the presence of discriminant validity. These tests include the HTMT ratio and the Fornell and Larcker Criterion. Franke and Sarstedt (2019) proposed that the acceptable values of the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio should be less than 0.85. It can be seen that all HTMT ratios were within the range of 0.277 and 0.689. Moreover, Fornell and Larcker (1981) argued that in the Fornell–Larcker criterion the values at the top of each column must be greater than the ones below them. This assumption was adequately met and hence it can be ascertained that discriminant validity existed within the data set.

The sustainability of the model was studied using the values of r-square. The r-square values in proximity to 0.50 denote high model sustainability (Hair et al., 2014). The r-square values for brand performance is 0.47 and internal branding was 0.15. This indicates high model sustainability. Moreover, the inner-VIF values were also evaluated. Legate et al. (2021) proposed that the inner VIF values must be lower than 5 to eliminate the presence of collinearity. The results indicated that all inner-VIF values were well below 5. As a result, the issue of collinearity was successfully mitigated. The normed fixed index (NFI) also

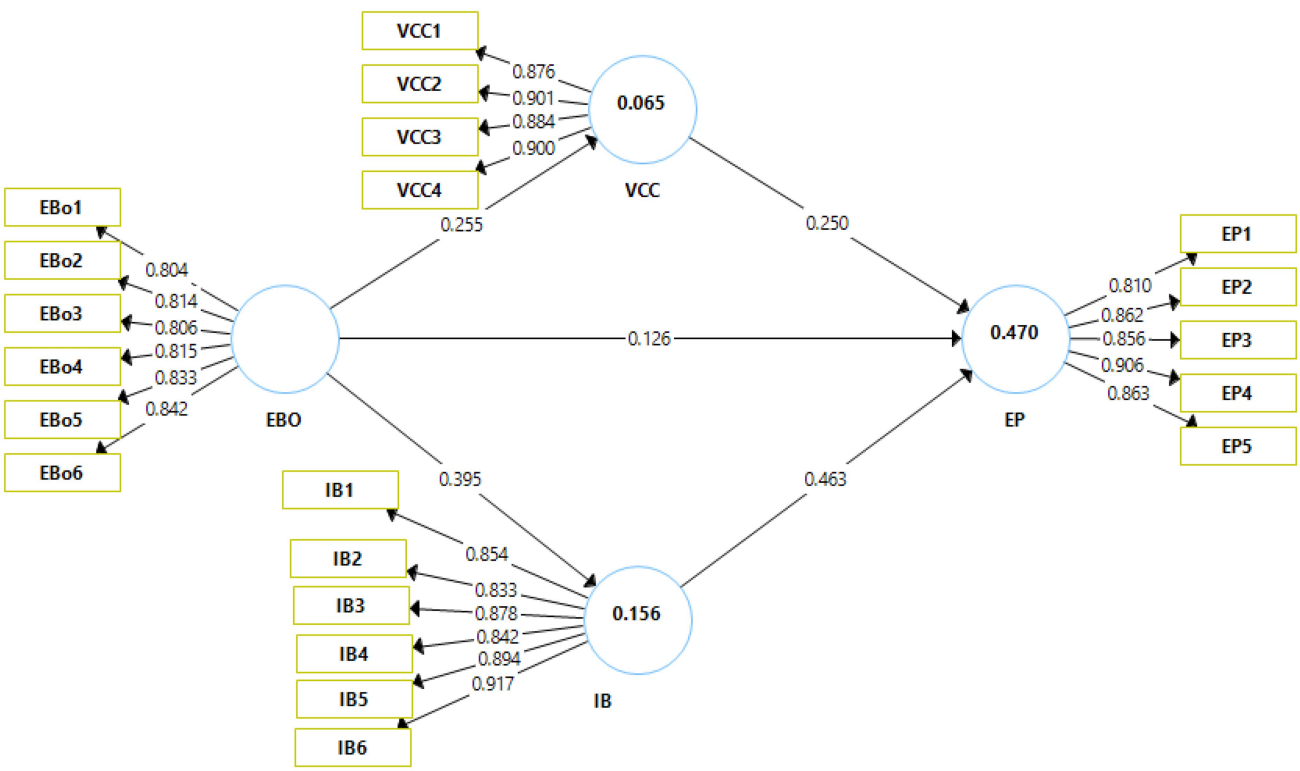

FIGURE 2 | Output of measurement model. EBO, enterprise brand orientation; VCC, customer value co-creation; IB, internal branding; EP, brand performance.

TABLE 2 | Model assessment (Direct model).

	Factor loadings		VIF	Construct reliability and validity		
				α	Composite reliability	AVE
Enterprise brand orientation	EBo1	0.804	2.456			
	EBo2	0.814	2.555			
	EBo3	0.806	2.442	0.902	0.925	0.671
	EBo4	0.815	2.631			
	EBo5	0.833	2.549			
	EBo6	0.842	2.591			
Brand performance	EP1	0.810	2.127			
	EP2	0.862	2.690	0.912	0.934	0.740
	EP3	0.856	2.763			
	EP4	0.906	3.590			
	EP5	0.863	2.921			
Internal branding	IB1	0.854	2.762			
	IB2	0.833	2.429			
	IB3	0.878	3.468	0.936	0.949	0.757
	IB4	0.842	2.677			
	IB5	0.894	4.421			
	IB6	0.917	4.928			
Customer value co-creation	VCC1	0.876	2.450			
	VCC2	0.901	3.798			
	VCC3	0.884	2.700	0.913	0.939	0.793
	VCC4	0.900	3.916			

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity.

	Fornell–Larcker criterion				Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio			
	Brand orientation	Brand performance	Internal branding	CVC	Brand orientation	Enterprise performance	Internal branding	CVC
Brand orientation	0.819							
Brand performance	0.372	0.860			0.409			
Internal branding	0.395	0.637	0.870		0.427	0.689		
CVC	0.255	0.513	0.500	0.890	0.277	0.559	0.538	

Brand orientation, enterprise brand orientation, CVC, customer value co-creation.

showed significant values. These two indicators are used to measure overall model fitness. As per Grimm and Wagner (2020) the values of SRMR and NFI should be close to 1. The results suggest that the model is highly fit for the data (NFI = 0.857).

Structural Model

The visual depiction of the results of the structural model is shown in **Figure 3**. The figure depicts the structural bootstrapping method that was adopted to validate the proposed hypotheses. The bootstrapping was carried out at a 95% confidence interval.

The value of p and the t-statistic value are the key indicators that are used to make the decision on the acceptance or rejection of a particular hypothesis. Winship and Zhuo (2020) suggest that for a hypothesis to be accepted, the t-value should be above 1.96. On the other hand, Ioannidis (2018) posited that the value of p should be less than 0.05 in order to ascertain the acceptance of a hypothesis. Moreover, the effect size (f) denotes the effect of a predictor on the outcome variable (Funder and Ozer, 2019). An effect size closer to 0 is considered weak whereas, an effect size closer to 1 is considered strong.

The outcome of the analysis of the direct effects can be seen in **Table 4**. H1 predicted that enterprise brand orientation had an effect on brand performance. The corresponding t and p values are 2.393 and 0.017, respectively. Therefore, H1 has been accepted. The f-value ($f = 0.025$) denotes weak effect size. H2 posited that enterprise brand orientation had an effect on customer value co-creation. The results are significant (i.e., $t = 4.824$, $p = 0.000$). Hence, H2 has also been accepted. F value ($f = 0.069$) indicates weak effect size. H3 stated that customer value co-creation had an effect on brand performance. The t and value of p ($t = 4.30$, $p = 0.000$) denote that the results are significant and hence, H3 is also accepted. The effect size is weak as denoted by the f value ($f = 0.088$). Furthermore, H4 proposed that enterprise brand orientation had an effect on internal branding. The results are significant in nature ($t = 8.711$, $p = 0.000$). As a result, H4 is also accepted. Effect size ($f = 0.185$)

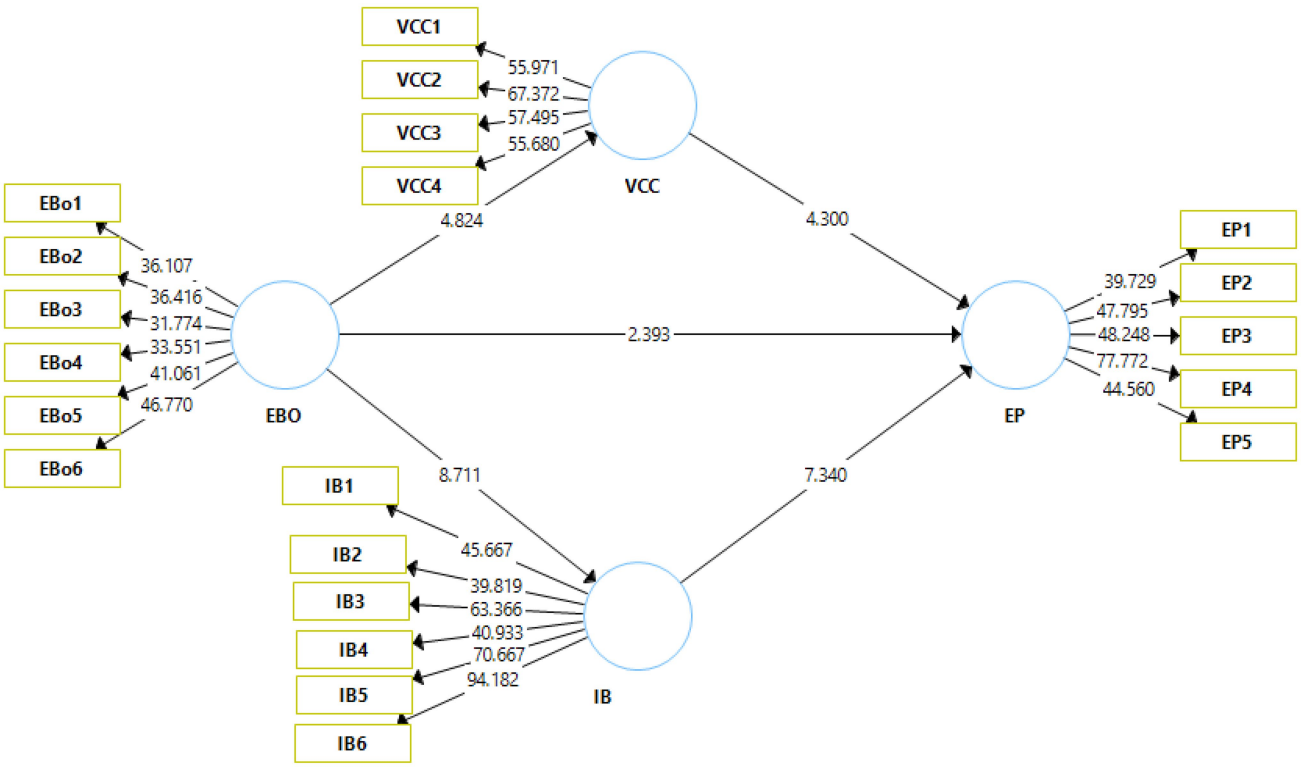

FIGURE 3 | Output of structural model bootstrapping. EBO, enterprise brand orientation; VCC, customer value co-creation; IB, internal branding; EP, brand performance.

TABLE 4 | Direct effects of the variable.

Paths	H	O	*T*-statistics	Value of *p*	Results
Enterprise Brand Orientation → Brand Performance	H_1	0.126	2.393	0.017	Accepted
Enterprise Brand Orientation → Value Co-Creation	H_2	0.255	4.824	0.000	Accepted
Customer Value Co-Creation → Enterprise Brand Performance	H_3	0.250	4.300	0.000	Accepted
Enterprise Brand Orientation → Internal Branding	H_4	0.395	8.711	0.000	Accepted
Internal Branding → Enterprise Brand Performance	H_5	0.463	7.340	0.000	Accepted

H, hypothesis; O, original sample.

is weak to moderate. H5 has been accepted that postulated that internal branding had an effect on bran performance has shown significant results ($t=7.340$, $p=0.000$). Effect size for this relationship is ($f=0.272$) which shows weak to moderate effect.

The analysis of the indirect effects is presented in **Table 5**. H5 proposed that customer satisfaction (CS) mediates the relationship between employee efficiency (EE) and enterprise brand equity (EBE). H5 has been accepted as indicated by the t and value of p ($t=2.274$, $p=0.023$). Moreover, H6 predicted that CS mediated the relationship between enterprise innovation (EI) and EBE. The results are significant ($t=2.877$, $p=0.004$). Consequently, H6 has also been accepted. It can be concluded that customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between employee efficiency, enterprise innovation, and enterprise brand equity.

The factor loading for the moderating variable of enterprise innovative capabilities is also found to have significant factor loading for all the items (i.e., above 0.7). Further, the Cronbach alpha and the composite reliabilities also found to be above 0.7 showing that internal consistency of the variable. In addition, the average variance extracted was found above 0.765 which shows that variance is explained more than the error hence meeting the criteria. Therefore, **Table 6** shows the model assessment with moderation which is acceptable. Similarly, the HTMT ratios and Fornell and Larcker criteria obtained with the new variable of enterprise innovative capabilities also showed significant results (**Figure 4**).

The analysis of the moderating effects is presented in **Table 7**. H8 proposed that enterprise innovative capabilities do not moderate the effect of enterprise brand orientation on brand performance. H8 has been rejected as indicated by the t and value of p ($t=0.615$, $p=0.539$) (**Figure 5**).

TABLE 5 | Indirect effects of the variable.

Paths	H	O	*T*-statistics	Value of *p*	Results
Enterprise Brand Orientation → Customer Value Co-Creation → Brand Performance	H_6	0.064	3.293	**0.001**	Accepted
Enterprise Brand Orientation → Internal Branding → Enterprise Performance	H_7	0.183	5.805	**0.000**	Accepted

H, hypothesis; O, original sample.

TABLE 6 | Model assessment (Moderation).

	Factor loadings		Construct reliability and validity		
			α	Composite reliability	AVE
Enterprise brand orientation	EBo1	0.80			
	EBo2	0.81			
	EBo3	0.80	0.902	0.925	0.671
	EBo4	0.81			
	EBo5	0.83			
	EBo6	0.84			
Brand performance	EP1	0.81			
	EP2	0.86	0.912	0.934	0.740
	EP3	0.85			
	EP4	0.90			
	EP5	0.86			
Internal branding	IB1	0.85			
	IB2	0.83			
	IB3	0.87	0.936	0.949	0.757
	IB4	0.84			
	IB5	0.89			
	IB6	0.91			
Customer value co-creation	VCC1	0.87			
	VCC2	0.90			
	VCC3	0.88	0.913	0.939	0.793
	VCC4	0.90			
Enterprise innovative capabilities	EIC1	0.85			
	EIC2	0.93			
	EIC3	0.84	0.901	0.920	0.765
	EIC4	0.91			
	EIC5	0.85			

DISCUSSION

The current research focused on mediating roles of customer value co-creation and internal branding between enterprise brand orientations and brand performance. Variations in BO and brand performance relationships are more or less significant for firms. It explores the moderating elements of a company's innovative capabilities (Odoom and Mensah, 2019). The research postulated positive benefits of innovation as complementing enterprise capabilities which enhance the BO and brand performance relationship among firms (Baumgarth et al., 2013). The study's findings are supported by earlier research in a variety of ways. Overall, our research demonstrates a favorable association between BO and brand performance, as well as a substantial positive relationship within the parameters of customer value co-creation and internal branding. This research was conducted to find out the possible positive and significant association between enterprise BO and brand performance. As it was previously elaborated in many investigations that BOs had been significantly associated with brand performance whether it be financial or relational (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018; Chang et al., 2021). This research also found similar results indicating that enterprise BOs were positively and significantly connected with the brand performance of the enterprises.

This is due to the fact that top management shapes the orientations of the enterprises keeping in view the ultimate outcome of the decisions and strategies. Therefore, these results were obtained showing a positive and strong association. In the current investigation, some other direct associations were also evaluated. The direct association between enterprise BO with customer value co-creation produced a significant association. The possible reason behind such results lies in the fact that strategic planning of the enterprises is done keeping in mind the importance of the customers. The customers share the values of the brands and act as a stakeholder in brand promotion (Reijonen et al., 2015). Therefore, BOs are directly linked with customer value co-creation. The impact of customer value co-creation showed a strong association with the brand performance which again showed that shared value between customers and the associated enterprise work on the shared objectives. Therefore, customer value co-creation leads to improved brand performance. Similar kinds of results have been previously published by many scholars such as Yi and Gong (2013). The values of the enterprises and the customers had shown a strong mediating impact between enterprise BO and brand performance. These kinds of mediating effects of customer value co-creation indicated that direct effects of enterprise BO and brand performance could be more enhanced if customers are also kept in focus. This could lead to improved brand performance for the employees.

These kinds of results were also reported by Chang et al. (2018) previously, which affirmed the significance of the customer value co-creation in the context of enterprise brand performance. This study also looked into the possible relationship between enterprise BOs and internal branding. The results are supported by the many researchers in the recent past indicating that BOs are directly and significantly related to internal branding. As an internal branding approach, employees of the enterprises are kept in the direct focus of the organizations. Similarly, like the customers, employees are also the stakeholders who work for the branding of the enterprises (Eid et al., 2019). These results are also in accordance with some previous researchers who affirmed that there was a significant association between enterprise BO and internal

TABLE 7 | Moderating effect.

Paths	H	O	*T*-statistics	Value of *p*	Results
EIc_Mod → Brand Performance	H_8	0.027	0.615	0.539	Rejected

EIC_Mod, Enterprise innovative capabilities.

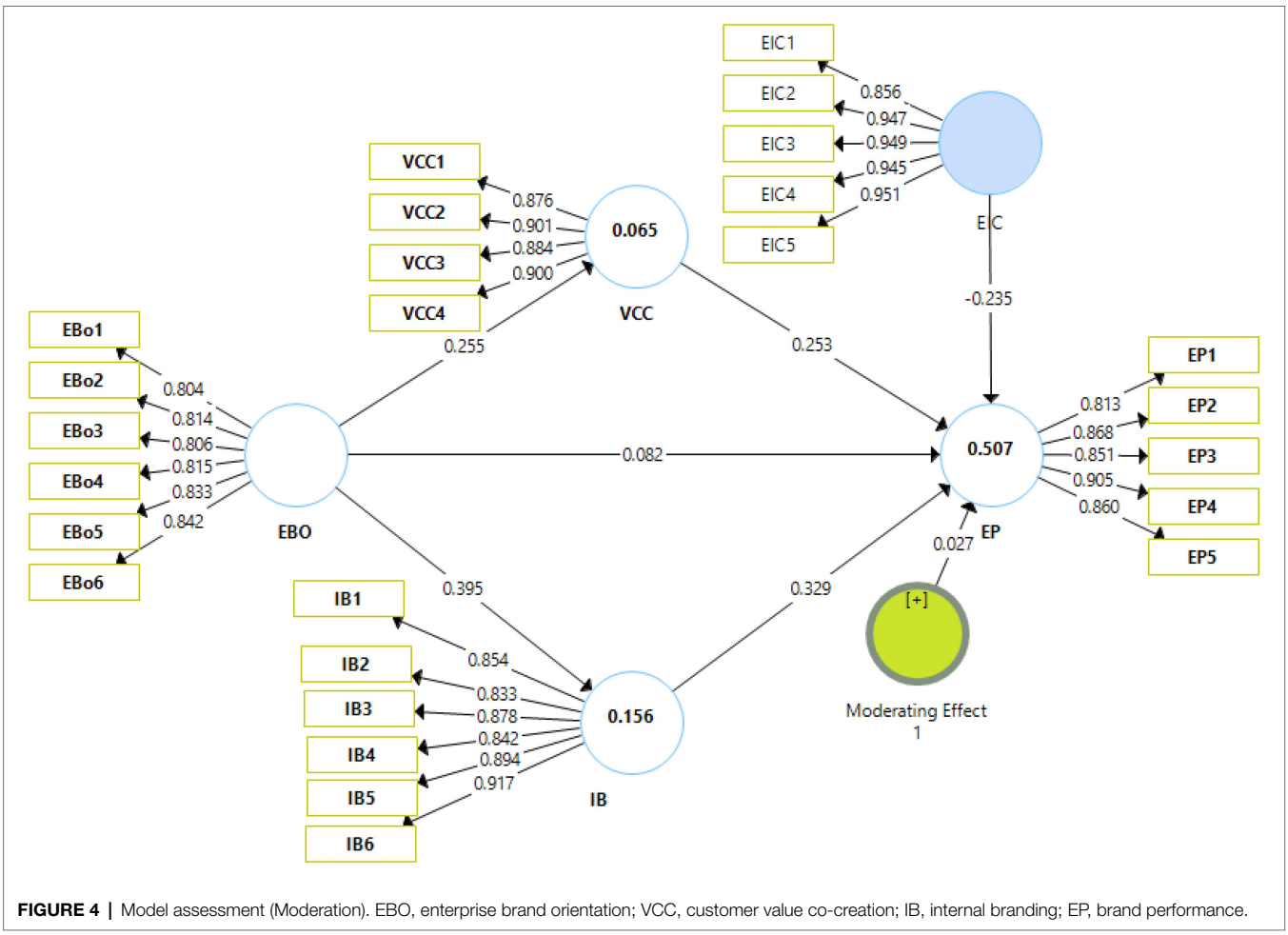

FIGURE 4 | Model assessment (Moderation). EBO, enterprise brand orientation; VCC, customer value co-creation; IB, internal branding; EP, brand performance.

branding of the enterprises (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). The results also indicated that internal branding affected the brand performance positively and also mediated the relationship of enterprise brand performance. The results were also in accordance with some of the previous research which looked into the direct relationships between internal branding with brand performance (Iyer et al., 2018). This proved that proper internal branding of the employees could lead to the improved brand performance of the enterprises. The mediating role of internal branding was also significant between the relationship of enterprise BO and the brand performance of the enterprises. This role of internal branding boosted the relationship between both.

It indicated that spending resources on the employees, enhance the performance of the brands positively. Previously, the mediating role of internal branding was also evaluated in different contexts showing a strong role of it (Iyer et al., 2018). Moreover, the moderating effects of enterprise innovative capabilities could not influence the brand performance in this research. This is possibly due to the fact that BOs were strongly associated with brand performance. Therefore, enterprise innovative capabilities could not show its regulating role, or these were also part of the branding of firms. Although, some researchers indicated that enterprise innovative capability regulated the BO and brand performance. It might happen due to a lack of mediators between both in the previous study (Maldonado-Guzmán et al., 2018).

Theoretical Implications

There are some key and valuable theoretical implications associated with this study. This research significantly adds to

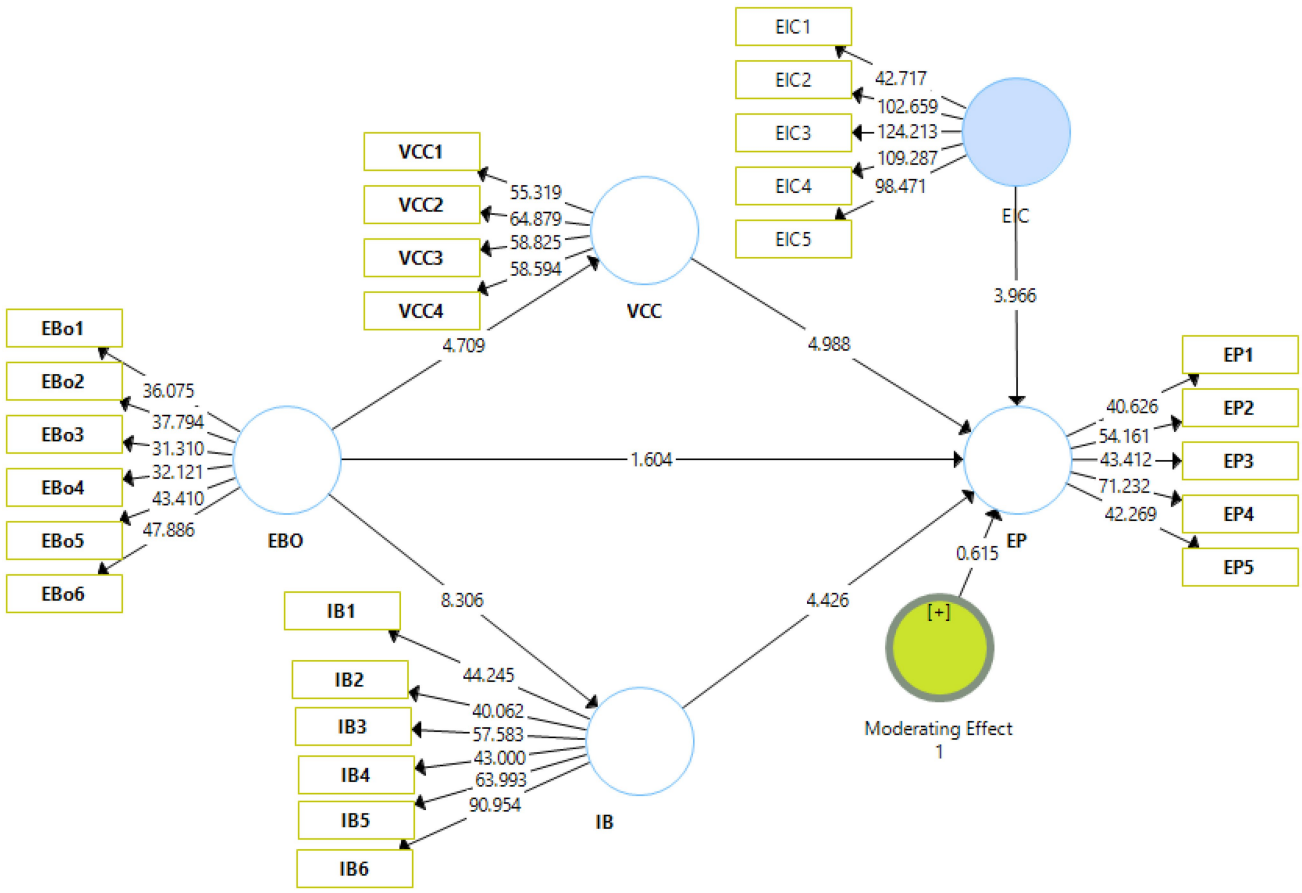

FIGURE 5 | Structural model bootstrapping (Moderation). EBO, enterprise brand orientation; VCC, customer value co-creation; IB, internal branding; EP, brand performance.

the RBV of firms. The theory focuses on the improvement of resources for the betterment in performance. While, this research is a significant contribution in the management sciences. The resources of companies are enhanced by incorporation of internal branding strategies. It leads to the development of a brand. Therefore, brand performance of such companies is improved. This adds to the underpinned theory of RBV. Moreover, this research also backs the underpinnings of DCT which is focused on improving innovative capabilities of firms. Improved innovative capabilities add in to brand performance. In this way, both of these theories get a strong support from current research. It also signifies the importance of current research in which impacts of BO on brand performance are evaluated.

Brand performance is significantly improved through integrated approach of BO, innovative capabilities, and customer value co-creation. Firstly, this study undertook a rigorous inquiry to produce empirical evidence that indicates the presence of a strong relationship between enterprise brand orientation, internal branding, customer value co-creation and the brand performance. By undertaking this inquiry, this study addressed the scarcity of knowledge that was present on this subject. It was established that by making considerable investments in enhancing brand orientation of the organization and deploying internal branding in the business processes, an organization can significantly enhance its overall brand performance. Secondly, the present study provided strong theoretical evidence by assessing the mediating role of customer value co-creation and internal branding in enhancing the relationship between enterprise brand orientation and brand performance. Both of these inquiries have significantly added value to the existing literature that is available on the predictors and antecedents of enterprise brand orientation, internal branding and the brand performance.

Practical Implications

The results of this study present some key practical implications for managers and businesses. (1) The results suggest that the organizations should make considerable efforts toward enhancing the overall enterprise brand orientation that counts for the improved brand performance. This can be achieved by setting realistic work objectives and by effectively communicating work expectations to the employees that would contribute to creating value for the customers along with employees. (2) Moreover, the employees need to be provided with a adequate motivation and productive work environment so that they can maximize

their performance on the job and contribute to enhancing the brand performance. (3) Further, the businesses should also make considerable investments in not only creating but adopting and implementing such practices to provide smooth and reliable services to the customers that would add to the branding of the organization. (4) Furthermore, the organizations should also develop a customer satisfaction blueprint and train its workforce to follow customer satisfaction protocols in order to maximize customer value co-creation to enhance the customer base. These efforts would in turn cause an enhancement in the overall brand performance.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The limitations that were associated with this study included a restricted sample size. (1) The sample size could be enhanced by future studies to yield more generalizable results. The present study was undertaken within the geographical location of China. This study should be conducted in other cultural contexts and regions to improve the generalizability of the findings. (2) This study adopted a cross-sectional design. Therefore, future studies should use a longitudinal design to acquire data from respondents at multiple points in time. This would significantly improve the reliability of the results. (3) Lastly, future studies should incorporate other mediating variables like customer satisfaction and measure the brand performance through employee efficiency and enterprise innovation. Future research should introduce other potential moderators such as perceived brand image and role clarity in order to broaden the understanding of the factors that influence enterprise performance.

CONCLUSION

Brand performance has recently received renewed interest from researchers and academic scholars. Previously, brand performance was mainly studied from the perspective of the organizations and there was a dearth of knowledge regarding the factors customer value co-creation. Therefore, this study undertook a rigorous inquiry to determine the impact of enterprise brand orientation on brand performance. This was done in the presence of customer value co-creation and internal branding as mediators. It was concluded that both enterprise brand orientation in the presence of internal branding customer value co-creation had a significant effect on brand performance. It was also noted that internal branding and customer value co-creation innovation had an effect on brand performance. Moreover, internal branding and customer value co-creation significantly mediated the relationship between employee efficiency, enterprise innovation, and enterprise brand equity. However, the moderating role of enterprise innovative capabilities could not significantly impact the relationship of enterprise brand orientation and brand performance.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Qilu Normal University, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

ZY conceived, designed, and wrote the paper. The author read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Role of celebrity endorsement in promoting employees' organization identification: A brand-based perspective

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Celebrity endorsement has been used for decades to promote products to consumers. As employees are one of the primary stakeholders and are known as second consumers, their concerns about celebrity endorsement effectiveness and pride need attention for building their identification with an organization. This study investigated the internal branding process by examining employees' brand orientation, celebrity-organization value congruence, and the accuracy of employee portrayal. Data are collected from a leading multinational bank in Pakistan through a structured questionnaire. The results of the study showed that when employees felt celebrity endorsement matched organizational values, the celebrity successfully portrayed actual corporate values. Thus, employees believed that endorsement effectively gained consumers' attention and built a strong corporate image. The study affirmed that employees' sense of pride toward their organization motivates them to identify with it. Furthermore, the results showed that value congruence mediates the relationship between brand orientation and endorsement effectiveness, while pride mediates the relationship between endorsement effectiveness and organization identification. Service organizations could use brand orientation to gain accurate employee portrayal that revives their pride and attachment with the organization and enhances corporate identification. The future directions and limitations are discussed.

KEYWORDS

organization identification, brand orientation, celebrity endorsement effectiveness, employee pride, social identity theory

Introduction

In marketing, celebrity endorsement is a very common phenomenon in the twenty-first century. Knoll and Matthes (2017) concluded that almost celebrities have appeared in every fifth advertisement. The study of Carlson et al. (2020) suggested that agencies have spent 10% of advertisement costs on promoting endorsements. In contrast, few multinational organizations have spent more than 25% of their promotion on endorsers. A celebrity is a personality who gains public appreciation and recognition from the name of the organization, whom they are endorsing for the purpose of promotion (McCracken, 1989).

Celebrities enjoy fame and popularity, influencing the endorsed brand's image. The celebrity portrays a clear image of an organization to consumers. Brand marketing by a celebrity or a famous personality develops attractive appeal, gains more attention, and high recall (Davies and Slater, 2015). Companies use celebrities to create a distinguished position in the market and to build a positive brand image (Ranjbarian et al., 2010), which shapes a positive consumer attitude and a unique brand personality/organization (Thomson, 2006). Marketing managers and advertisers use endorsement strategies such as celebrity endorsement for their organizations because they understand that consumer attitude toward a celebrity also transfers to the organization (Choi and Rifon, 2012). Therefore, marketers and advertisers hire an appropriate celebrity because the endorsement by consumers' accepted celebrity enhances consumers' positive attitude (Surana, 2008). The work of Schimmelpfennig (2018) also concluded that positive association of celebrity-brand congruence with brand evaluation played a role in designing advocacy and engagement.

Organizational identification is considered a strategic asset for creating creditability among stakeholders, and it leads marketing managers to gain a competitive advantage by fabricating a dynamic corporate environment (Melewar, 2003). Organizational identification is the prime motivation for employees to understand better corporate goals, vision, and culture, which present pride, and image (Downey, 1987). An organization with good corporate identification attracts executives with exceptional skills that provide admirable financial outcomes (Melewar and Saunders, 1998). With a definite identification, it is easier to portray organizational capabilities, differentiation strategies, and product/service diversification (Lippincott and Margulies, 1988). Moreover, the consumer perspective presented that product quality, brand image, and loyalty are linked with organizational identification that portrays brand orientation for external and internal customers. Thus, organization identification is a step toward producing a corporate brand that brings a sense of community among stakeholders (Markwick and Fill, 1997).

Corporate marketing explains the coordination of a brand based on its organizational culture and knowledge (Balmer, 2013). It presents a unique strategic organizational approach (Illia and Balmer, 2012; Balmer, 2017) that constitutes identification-based corporate orientation. Corporate marketing describes an organizational structure that allows all stakeholders to exchange their values and beliefs mutually similar to the marketing orientation, which comprises internal/external communication mediums like TVCs, publicity, public relations, and endorsements (Balmer et al., 2020). Corporate branding is an effective tool for managers to build emotional ownership among stakeholders, especially by using celebrities as brand ambassadors/endorsers.

Employees of the organization are also part of that audience influenced by celebrities. Berry (1980) and Papasolomou and Vrontis (2006) highlighted that employees are internal customers, and their support is essential for successful marketing programs. Employees also interpret, judge, and react to the marketing communication strategies of their organization (Gilly and Wolfinbarger, 1998; Scott and Lane, 2000), which affects their satisfaction (Shostack, 1987) and supports them in identifying with their organization (Khan and Stanton, 2010; Farrelly et al., 2012; Hofer and Grohs, 2018). Employee pride is always a priority for reputable organizations. Recent studies of organizational behavior suggested pride as an emerging area, and academic researchers investigated their relationships with the workplace (Ellington and Wilson, 2017; Kraemer et al., 2020). Various marketing techniques are used for internal marketing, which helps to shape behaviors for the achievement of organizational goals (Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000; Hartline and Bejou, 2004) and guide employees to live the brand image of their organization (Miles and Mangold, 2004). Ashforth and Mael (1989) and Dutton et al. (1994) studied the effects of new media advertising on employees' attitudes, Celsi and Gilly (2010) studied the effects of advertising, and Hofer and Grohs (2018) studied the effects of sponsorship toward organization identification and performance outcomes.

Corporate marketing demands those marketing strategies that are customer-oriented, which deliver valuable identification of organization and employees in society. The study by Carlson et al. (2020) argued that unproductive endorsement attracts customers toward the product attachment rather than building customer association/engagement. However, customer-endorser affiliation built a sense of community for internal and external customers. In the service sector, the association of celebrity endorsement plays a central role in generating identification because "people" are one of the key promotional mix elements. The study proposed that optioning relevant endorsers could play a transforming role in building employee pride and organizational identification.

Moreover, the direct association of celebrity endorsers generates customer knowledge and recognition of its expertise and product-endorser fit. A competitive organization consists of attributes such as marketing strategy, corporate culture, and behavior, and these aspects build identity. Nowadays, corporate identity is getting attention as a strategic goal in disciples like marketing and behavioral sciences (Melewar, 2003). To experience consistency for a corporate brand, employee commitment and behavior indicate brand values (Lohndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Piehler et al., 2016), pride, brand promise (Piha and Avlonitis, 2018), and desired level of brand identity (Harris and De Chernatony, 2001). Morhart et al. (2009) concluded that employees are vital for building organizational identity because any brand-branding intention needs all stakeholders to follow marketing mix strategies (Lohndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014). While promoting product/service, frontline employees deliver the organizational promise that expresses their sense of belonging with the organization (Boukis et al., 2021), characterized as employee pride. Employee pride is considered a psychological tendency toward an organization when an employee believes that his/her performance exceeds expectations (Kraemer et al., 2020). The value of employee pride provides value-based appraisal and generates organizational identification (Thomas et al., 2018).

The study used stimulus–organism–response (SOR) theory to mark the research gap by investigating celebrity value congruence, employee pride, and organizational identification of employees. From an organizational perspective, assumptions of social identity theory (SIT) are employed to interpret the psychological mechanism of identifying an organization. This theory states that individuals see groups as a reference point for gathering/sharing information about others/themselves (Tyler et al., 1996). Thus, employees adopt the social status of their organization and present their pride (Tyler, 1999) by following corporate values/beliefs, such as advocating celebrity promotion/endorsement. The employees' perspective suggested that an individual identification with the corporate world provides prestigious standings because being a part of that community brought pride and self-enhancement among stakeholders. Pratt (1998) focused on insights into social identification principles by investigating an individual's relationship with his/her social group; in this case, it is brand orientation with employee identification.

Organizations benefit from encouraging identification among employees, as their identification ensures that employees will prefer their organizational interests (Cheney, 1983). Therefore, the growth of any organization is accredited to its in-depth orientation (Wright et al., 1995), and it might be linked with organizational commitment, competitive advantage, and overall organizational performance (Urde, 1994; Wong and Merrilees, 2007; Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). Moreover, it enhances employees' identification and attachment with their organization (Foster et al., 2010).

Theoretical support and conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the cognitive psychological theory of SOR (Zimmerman, 2012). A stimulus is an object which induces an effect on an individual. Stimulus is the environmental cues that influence consumers' feelings and can change a consumer's overall behavior (Zimmerman, 2012). The SOR theory supports the effect of value-congruent endorsement on employees' attitudes and behavior. The research framework hypothesizes that stimuli or environmental cues (celebrity-organization value congruence) affect the organism (employees' emotional feelings), which produces effects (employees' identification with their organization) (Rajaguru, 2014). Therefore, the study proposed that celebrity-organization value congruence leads to endorsement-linked pride, which enhances employees' organization identification. Many studies have characterized different stimuli and organisms as a predictor of employee brand identification (Smidts et al., 2001; Mignonac et al., 2006; Bartels et al., 2007; Celsi and Gilly, 2010) based on the SOR model.

Based on organizational identification theory (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Dutton et al., 1994), the study proposed that internal branding and employee orientation enhance employees' identification with their organization. Internal branding processes aiming at increasing awareness and commitment of the employees toward their organization are essential to successfully implementing the organization's policies (Foster et al., 2010). The growth of any organization is accredited to its thorough orientation (Wright et al., 1995), which might be linked with organizational commitment, competitive advantage, profitability, and overall organizational performance, and success (Urde, 1994), and employee identification and attachment with the organization (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010).

Internal marketing theories clearly state that internal relations and interactions are important for employees' involvement, shaping their positive attitudes and motivating them to implement profitable corporate programs (Ahmed et al., 2003; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). Brand-oriented culture and philosophy guide an organization toward corporate goals (Balmer and Balmer, 2013). Brand equity is believed to be created and protected through a brand-oriented mindset (M'zungu et al., 2010). Some studies have confirmed the role of brand orientation and internal branding on performance outcomes, but limited attempts have been made on their effects on employees' behavior (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; De Chernatony et al., 2010).

Brand orientation facilitates long-term organizational survival. In such organizations, top management executives focus (Wong and Merrilees, 2005) on their brands and align organization strategies with brand strategies (Aaker, 1996), which result in higher brand performance (Gromark and Melin, 2011). Brand orientation is a system in which all the organization's processes work together to create, develop, and protect an organization's brand identity (Urde, 1999). Furthermore, it is an organizational culture that promotes the dominant role of a brand in an organization's strategies and decisions (Wong and Merrilees, 2007; Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). It is an inside-out identity view that presents the brand as a part of an organization's strategies and decisions (Urde et al., 2013).

Brand orientation acts as a mindset that contributes to organizational vision, mission, and values (Urde, 1999; Urde et al., 2013) and supports employees to live their brand (Ind, 2004), which enhances their brand identity and they grow as a strategic resource for an organization (Urde, 1999; De Chernatony et al., 2010; Wilden et al., 2010). Brand orientation facilitates organizational-wide commitment. Commitment and understanding of organizational values support employees to accept the external marketing communication, strengthening their existing beliefs and attitudes toward organizational values (Chakravarti et al., 1997). Hence, the employees who better understand their organizational values positively evaluate the celebrity endorser.

Many marketers and advertisers believe selecting the right celebrity is essential because consumers look for the fit between the celebrity and the organization/product (Choi and Rifon, 2012). A good congruence between the celebrity and organization/product effectively generates a positive endorsement/advertisement evaluation and increases the endorser's believability (Davies and Slater, 2015). Previous studies found that employees expect value congruence between their organization and marketing communication (Gilly and Wolfinbarger, 1998; Celsi and Gilly, 2010). As members of an organization, employees have detailed knowledge and use it to assess the congruence between the celebrity's and their organization's values. Employees believe that as the celebrity is portraying the values of an organization, he/she should be matched with the organizational values (Choi and Rifon, 2012). Hence,

> H1a: Brand orientation positively impacts employees' perception of celebrity-organization value congruence.

Understanding their shared values within an organization helps employees assess the match between the celebrity portrayal values and the employees' actual characteristics and behavior (Hogg and Turner, 1985). Tajfel and Turner (1982) revealed that people take self-categorization as a reference point to study the similarities between themselves and other members of a group. Therefore, employees evaluate the employee portrayal accuracy by endorser celebrity.

> H1b: Brand orientation positively impacts employees' perception of employee portrayal accuracy.

The celebrity-brand/product congruence plays an important role in deciding the effectiveness of a celebrity endorsement campaign (Hoogland et al., 2007). The celebrity casts a positive image on consumers, making endorsement more persuasive, thus increasing the organization's attractiveness. A strong link between the product/brand and celebrity is effective for attaining positive evaluations toward advertisement, which ultimately influences the endorser's believability (i.e., he will successfully portray the actual organization's and employee's value) and advertisement effectiveness (Davies and Slater, 2015). Literature suggests that value-congruent advertisement develops and enhances motivational characteristics toward portrayed values (Verplanken and Holland, 2002), which ultimately motivates employees to support the image of their organization portrayed by the endorser. The literature also supports that individuals who perceive similarities between external communication and existing beliefs and values show more assimilation to organizational communication (Sherif et al., 1965; Meyers and Sternthal, 1993).

> H2: (a) Celebrity-organization value congruence and (b) employee portrayal accuracy positively impact the perception of endorsement effectiveness.

Endorser value congruence is the likeness of an employee's values and those values portrayed by the celebrity. Endorser gives statements about organizational values, persuading employees to invoke their values and compare them to celebrity portrayed values.

> H3: Celebrity-organization value congruence positively impacts employee portrayal accuracy.

Organizational behavior scholars admit the influence of external organizational images on employees' attitudes (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). When employees feel that the endorsement has effectively gained consumer attention and positively influenced the organization's image, they "bask in the reflected glory" of the success of their organization (Cialdini et al., 1976). So we propose that:

> H4: Celebrity Endorsement effectiveness positively influences employee's pride.

Michie (2009) suggested that pride promotes behaviors that comply with an organization's social norms. It encourages

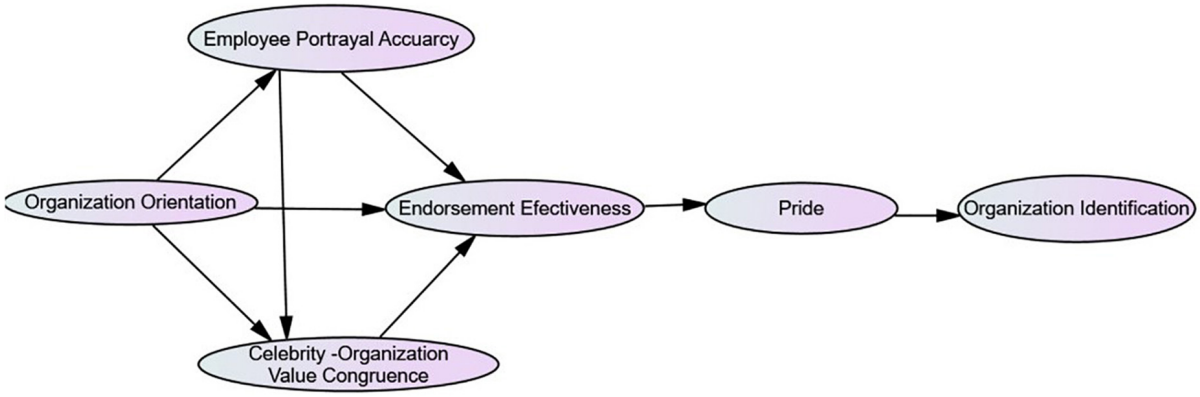

FIGURE 1
Conceptual framework.

employees to identify strongly with their employer as they feel honored to be linked with an organization that is publically appreciated (Dutton et al., 1994). The brand-equity relationship has been found important for gaining a consuming response and emphasizing their role in celebrity endorsement (Albert et al., 2017). The positive impression of a celebrity using a service/product is transferred to employees/customers, who also adopt the usage pattern of their beloved celebrity to build an endorser-brand relationship (Carlson et al., 2020). In consumer studies, consumer-endorser identification has been achieved through the effectiveness of the celebrity identification process (Kamins et al., 1989), which means that recognizable celebrities impact organization identification process. Similarly, SIT approach states that employees use the social status of their organization to guide them in estimating their self-worth (Tyler, 1999). Thus, individuals try to identify with organizations, which have prestigious standings, because membership of a prestigious organization increases their self-esteem and fulfills the need of self-enhancement (**Figure 1**).

> H5: Employee pride positively influences employee organizational identification.

Participants and procedures

To collect data from Habib Bank Limited (a leading commercial bank in Pakistan), we contacted the headquarters of HBL to request their support in data collection from their employees. Habib Bank Limited is a commercial bank in Pakistan with 1,650 branches all over Pakistan. Data were collected from 150 employees from HBL headquarters (Ndubisi et al., 2014). The sample-to-item ratio is generally recommended for exploratory factor analysis, which uses the number of items to decide the sample size in a study. The ratio between the item and the sample size should not be less than 5–1 (Gorsuch, 1983). Hair et al. (2018) suggested a sample-to-variable ratio to decide on sample size in a study. It is suggested that the minimum observation-to-variable ratio should be 5:1, but ratios of 15:1 or 20:1 are preferred.

The results of the demographics showed that 73% of respondents were male. More than 59% of the respondents were under the age of 40, showing that most of the employees are young and have been working with the organization for more than 10 years. An invitation (through email) to an online survey was sent to different employees working at the headquarters of HBL. Once they agreed to fill out the survey, the questionnaire was shared with them. The participants first responded to the items of brand orientation. After watching the HBL endorsement advertisement by famous cricketer Shaheen Shah Afridi, they evaluated celebrity-organization value congruence, employee portrayal accuracy, endorsement effectiveness, pride, and organization identification, which they feel resulted from watching the endorsement advertisement.

Measures

The constructs used in the study are accounted as "situated" variables because their responses were obtained as a reaction to the cue, an endorsement advertisement in our study that triggered temporary "situated" emotions such as pride and organization identification. The construct "brand orientation" was assessed on five items adopted from the study of Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010). "Value congruence" was assessed on three items adapted from Choi and Rifon (2012). Similarly, "pride" was assessed on three items, while "employee portrayal accuracy," "endorsement effectiveness, and organization identification" were assessed on four items/each

adopted from Celsi and Gilly (2010). The adopted items are mentioned in **Table 1**. After responding to questions related to the constructs, respondents answered the questions, including participants' demographic information, such as gender, age, and years of experience in the organization. The study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) for data analysis. SEM is a multivariate technique used to evaluate multivariate causal relationships among variables. SEM is a multivariate statistical tool used to analyze structural relationships and structural links between latent and measured variables.

Results

The study has used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to estimate the discriminant validity, convergent, and reliability of the research model. AMOS was used to estimate the maximum likelihood of the measurement model. The model showed acceptable fit indices: χ^2 = 257.012 with 1.147 CMIN/DF. The values of TLI, CFI, IFI, RFI, and NFI lie between 0.91 and 0.97, and the value of the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was 0.04. The GFI, CFI, and AGFI values are above 0.90 in the measurement model, indicating model fitness (Browne and Cudeck, 1993). Goodness-of-fit indices showed that the data fit thus supports construct validity. CFA was used to estimate the convergent validity of the constructs (Churchill, 1979). Convergent validity is supposed to occur if the pattern coefficient of the indicator exceeds 0.50 and the overall model has acceptable fit indices (Bagozzi et al., 1991).

Cronbach's alpha coefficient value was used to estimate the internal consistency, and all the values of Cronbach's alpha were found to be greater than the proposed threshold point of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The Cronbach's alpha value for construct brand orientation was measured at about 0.82, celebrity-organization value congruence was 0.87, employee portrayal accuracy was 0.88, endorsement effectiveness was 0.89, pride was 0.85, and organization identification was 0.83. These are significantly higher than the cutoff point of 0.70, confirming the constructs' reliability (Nunnally, 1978; see **Table 1**). Factor loadings were found significant at the 0.01 level, and loadings above 0.40 were retained for analysis (see **Table 1**).

The average variance extracted (AVE) was estimated to study the discriminant validity. As Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested, discriminant validity is supposed to occur if the AVE of a construct is greater than the correlation value with other constructs. All the AVEs values are larger than the threshold level of 0.50. Discriminant validity has been confirmed by following Fornell–Larcker's criterion that all the square roots of AVEs are greater than their respective correlation values (Hew and Sharifah, 2017; see **Table 2**).

The results showed a significant relationship between brand orientation and organization-celebrity value congruence, hence supporting H1a (β = 0.56, $p < 0.05$). The relationship between brand orientation and employee portrayal accuracy is also significant, which supports H1b (β = 0.58, $p < 0.05$). Hence, the study supports the idea that brand orientation shapes employees attitude toward organization policies and decisions. Brand orientation also indirectly affects endorsement effectiveness (β = 0.05). Brand orientation does not directly affect endorsement effectiveness, so organization-celebrity value congruence was found to mediate the relationship between brand orientation and endorsement effectiveness. The results further showed a significant relationship of organization-celebrity value congruence with endorsement effectiveness and with employee portrayal accuracy, hence supporting H2a (β = 0.32, $p < 0.5$) and H3 (β = 0.42, $p < 0.5$), while employee portrayal accuracy was found to be insignificant with endorsement effectiveness, rejecting H2b. However, employee portrayal accuracy partially mediates the relationship between organization-celebrity value congruence and endorsement effectiveness. Endorsement effectiveness significantly correlates with pride (β = 0.76, $p < 0.001$) and supports H4. The relationship between pride and organization identification is also significant, supporting H5 (β = 0.37, $p < 0.001$). The relationship between endorsement effectiveness and organization identification is fully mediated by pride, as there was no direct effect of endorsement effectiveness on organization identification. Hence, the study supports the idea that pride associated with an organization's activities and policies could lead to employees' identification with the organization.

Discussion

The goal was to investigate whether brand orientation enhances employees' organization identification or not. The study supports that internal branding influences employees' organization identification. Thus, brand orientation encourages supportive organizational behaviors that motivate employees in the workplace. The study provides empirical evidence of the proposed association between brand orientation and employees' identification with their organization, hence confirming previous literature on the consequences of internal branding (Ahmed and Rafiq, 1999; Punjaisri et al., 2008; Hirvonen et al., 2013; Biedenbach and Manzhynski, 2016). Brand orientation is an organizational culture that promotes the dominant role of a brand in an organization's strategies and decisions (Wong and Merrilees, 2007; Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). The results showed that brand orientation could help employees to positively associate with organizations' actions and take decisions accordingly,

TABLE 1 Items, factor loadings, and reliability.

Construct	Factor loadings	Reliability
Brand orientation		0.82
In our company, we have a clear idea of what our brand stands for; brand identity and brand promise are well defined	0.92	
We use all our marketing activities to develop our brand and enhance its strength	0.96	
We recognize our brand as a valuable asset and strategic resource, which we continually develop and protect in the best possible way.	0.87	
Brand equity (or brand strength) is a control factor in our company.	0.93	
All business decisions are evaluated with respect to their impact on the brand	0.77	
Value congruence		0.87
I think that Shaheen Shah Afridi promoting HBL is a good fit	0.91	
I think that Shaheen Shah Afridi is compatible with the image of HBL	0.84	
I think that the values of Shaheen Shah Afridi are congruent with the values of HBL	0.83	
Employee portrayal accuracy		0.88
Employees are accurately portrayed by the celebrity	0.77	
Employees has shown by the celebrity as they really are	0.79	
I believe many employees in the organization are similar to those portrayed by the celebrity	0.92	
Employees can live up to the image shown by celebrity	0.68	
Endorsement effectiveness		0.89
I believe the endorsement by celebrity will increase sales of HBL	0.94	
I believe that the endorser will be well liked by customers	0.96	
The endorsement by this celebrity effectively raise the visibility of HBL	0.89	
The endorsement by celebrity is effective	0.90	
Pride		0.85
The celebrity endorser make me proud of HBL	0.88	
Seeing celebrity endorsing HBL makes me feel good about HBL	0.92	
I enjoy telling others about the celebrity endorser	0.91	
Organization identification		0.83
I am proud to tell others I am part of HBL	0.92	
I care about the fate of HBL	0.85	
HBL successes is my successes.	0.75	
I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help HBL be successful	0.86	

TABLE 2 Discriminant validity, convergent validity, and R-square of O.I.

	Orientation	VC	EPA	EE	Pride	OI	AVE	CR	R
Orientation	0.83						0.690	0.991	
V.C.	0.28	0.92					0.086	0.089	
EPA	0.38	0.38	0.76				0.951	0.803	
E.E.	0.03	0.24	0.20	0.84			0.718	0.929	
Pride	0.16	0.28	0.26	0.44	0.88		0.774	0.916	
O.I.	0.09	0.24	0.00	0.20	0.38	0.81	0.717	0.912	0.31

Diagonal values are the sq-root of AVE; VC, value congruence; EPA, employee portrayal accuracy; EE, endorsement effectiveness; OI, organization identification; AVE, average variance explained; CR, composite reliability.

which is in line with the conclusion provided by M'zungu et al. (2010) and Balmer and Balmer (2013). Therefore, it encourages employees to associate with organizations' celebrity endorsers.

The study confirmed that brand orientation positively impacts employees' perceptions of employee portrayal accuracy and organization-celebrity value congruence, which is in line with the results of Matanda and Ndubisi (2013), who confirmed the impact of internal customer orientation on person-organization fit. Furthermore, the study also supported the findings of prior research stating that organizational competencies can promote employees' commitment (Ahmed et al., 2003) because brand orientation shares a strong covenant relation with its stakeholders (including employees) (Balmer,

1998, 2001; Balmer and Gray, 2003). It promotes a culture of shared beliefs, behaviors, and expectations (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016), shaping employees' attitudes and behaviors (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010) toward celebrity endorsers and promoting organizational acceptability' values portrayed by the celebrity.

Brand orientation promotes brand-supportive behavior that ensures that employees shape their behavior in correspondence with the brand identity and its values (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). When employees come across a brand image of their organization, they get motivated to play their role as a stakeholder and attempt to relate it to their own identity (Gregory, 2007). Therefore, the employees who work with brand-oriented organizations feel a fit between celebrity-organization values.

Moreover, employees' perception of celebrity-organization values congruence enhances the perception of endorsement effectiveness. These results are in line with the finding of Celsi and Gilly (2010) and Choi and Rifon (2012), who supported that selection of a favorable celebrity is essential because consumers look for the fit between the celebrity and the organization/product (Davies and Slater, 2015). Therefore, the study concluded that good congruence between the celebrity and organization/product effectively generates positive endorsement/advertisement evaluation and increases endorsers' believability. The work of Meyers and Sternthal (1993) also suggested that employees who perceive similarities between external communication and existing beliefs and values show more attachment and advocate unique organization identification. However, this study does not support the role of employee portrayal accuracy in endorsement effectiveness, which is not in line with the previous literature (Celsi and Gilly, 2010) because employees perceive that puffery is part of an advertisement and integrated marketing communication (IMC) is designed for customers (James and Alman, 1996; Gilly and Wolfinbarger, 1998). From the employee perspective, employees' portrayal accuracy has no impact on endorsement effectiveness, as they understand organizational culture and philosophy.

The cognitive theory of emotion proposes that emotions are developed in response to an activity (effective endorsement) which is judged to its effects on one's wellbeing (such as organization success) (Michie, 2009). The results showed that effective endorsement brought employee pride, which is in line with the findings of Celsi and Gilly (2010). The effective endorsement gives a sense of pride to employees as it successfully promotes a positive image of the organization among consumers and society because of its position in society (Simon, 1995). Ashforth (2011) revealed that external organizational images influence the behavior of employees. So, when employees come across an image of their organization, they get motivated to play their role as a stakeholder and strive to relate it with their own identity (Scott and Lane, 2000) because they asses their self-worth based on the social standing of their organization (Tyler, 1999).

The study supported that the pride associated with the endorsement-linked recognition of their organization can help employees to strongly identify with their organization, which is in line with the findings of previous studies (Smidts et al., 2001; Fuller et al., 2006; Bartels et al., 2007; Celsi and Gilly, 2010; Khan et al., 2013). The employee perspective of SIT states that employees use the social status of their organization to guide them in estimating their self-worth (Tyler, 1999). Thus, individuals try to identify with organizations with prestigious standings because membership in a prestigious organization increases their self-esteem and fulfills the need for self-enhancement.

Hence, the study proved that brand orientation develops employees' attitudes toward celebrity endorsement. Internal marketing theories state that internal association and interactions are important for employees' involvement, shaping their positive attitudes and motivating them to implement profitable corporate programs (Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). By developing the employees' attitude toward the celebrity endorser and his/her effectiveness, the employer could increase their identification with their organization. Furthermore, marketers and advertisers need to understand the importance of brand orientation on employees' organization supportive behaviors toward organizations' programs and policies, especially policies related to external marketing communication. The corporate internal communication process needs to be planned to ensure the product/service knowledge is constant and focuses on promise accuracy. The relevance of marketing strategies for employees with corporate values could strengthen their organizational identification.

Conclusion

Employees are considered as one of the primary stakeholders, so their concerns toward the celebrity endorser should be examined while planning IMC techniques. Employees have extensive knowledge of their organization and use it while evaluating the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers. Therefore, marketers and advertisers should hire only celebrities congruent with organizational values. The celebrities should understand that they need to portray only the actual values of the employees and organization.

This research studied the effect of celebrity value congruence and employee portrayal accuracy on employees' attitudes toward endorsement effectiveness. However, there is a need to study more about the employees' attitudes toward celebrity endorsers. First, employees' general and specific attitudes toward celebrities should be studied to understand how employees' attitudes toward a celebrity could facilitate them to identify

with the organization and its endorsement campaign. Second, the effect of other organizational factors, including human resources practices, working environment, and methods of service provisions, could be studied to evaluate employees' reactions toward celebrity endorse. The internal communication process should be planned to ensure the provision of constant and detailed information to the employees of an organization. Also, the relevance of marketing activities with employees and organization values can strengthen their identification with their organization, enhance their commitment, and motivate them to adopt more supportive behavior. The study recommends that advertisers and marketers hire a celebrity endorser that matches the organization's values so that employees may relate to it. Marketers must motivate committed organization followers to enhance their beliefs about the organizational policies. Employees' internal communication should support positive and strong beliefs about the organization's marketing initiatives.

As the employees were exposed to actual celebrity endorsers and endorsement advertisements of the organization, we might have missed the effects of controlled experimental research, which could control any bias toward celebrity/endorsement advertisement. The study evaluates the effect of employees' attitudes toward celebrity endorsers on their identification with their organization; future research should be conducted to study the effects on different performance outcomes such as employee customer focus. Another limitation of this study is the limited sample size that might not represent the population, so further studies with larger sample sizes might be conducted to have a more accurate representation. Future research could also use multiple-level data from consumers and employees to analyze the impact of endorser effectiveness and identification.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Influencing factors of employee brand equity from the perspective of FinTech

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Recent years have seen a heated discussion on what influences employees' recognition of enterprise brand equity among the psychological community. Some empirical evidence suggests that the brand equity of consumers and brand equity of sales are two categories that should be studied. However, more recent discussions have focused more on the former. In contrast, this study discusses the factors influencing brand equity based on the employee level. Moreover, this paper examines whether FinTech can help companies get out of financing difficulties and thus improve employees' brand equity recognition. This research illustrates how FinTech has become an essential driver of brand equity value. Based on micro panel data on enterprises from 2011 to 2019, we analyze the transmission mechanism between the two factors and the mediating role of financing constraints. FinTech's development promotes employees' recognition of corporate brand equity, and financing constraints are an essential transmission path between the two factors. Furthermore, the impact of financing constraints on employee brand equity identity is characterized by cross-regional economic heterogeneity. In contrast, the development of FinTech characterizes the cross-enterprise heterogeneity in employees' recognition of brand equity value. Altogether, this study demonstrates the promising application of FinTech in influencing the mechanisms of employee brand equity.

KEYWORDS

employee brand equity, FinTech, enterprise, psychological factor, China

Highlights

- FinTech can not only directly increase the expectation of employee brand equity but also realize this process indirectly. Importantly, financing constraint is an effective intermediary variable between the two.
- The inhibitory effect of financing constraints on employee brand equity is significantly weaker for state-owned enterprises than that for private enterprises.
- The inhibitory effect of financing constraints is significantly stronger for private enterprises in the eastern region than those from other regions.

Introduction

In the past decade, to mitigate the impact of 2008 subprime mortgage crisis, the Chinese government undertook a 4-trillion-yuan economic stimulus (Lian and Chen, 2021). While this helped create tens of thousands of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), overly loose regulatory policies left the liberalized market open to a variety of problems caused by the fragile market structure (Yuan et al., 2021). For example, supervising the quality of brand equity among different enterprises was not easy. Therefore, the China Banking Regulatory Commission (CBRC) launched an emergency intervention, following which commercial banks tightened their loose financing policy. However, due to tighter financing approvals, non-state-owned enterprises (non-SOE; e.g., SMEs) struggled in the highly deteriorated financing environment (Lian and Chen, 2021).

Recently, more and more corporate executives have become concerned about the impact of a broken corporate capital chain on the brand equity of their employees (Zhu et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2019). Brand equity can be a tool for quantifying the role of brands (Wang et al., 2020) and serve as an essential element for enterprises to obtain profits and revenues from external markets. Brand equity provides administrators with strategic support by weighing the pros and cons of brands in terms of finance, market competition, and consumption experience. Research shows that employees' sense of belonging to and identification with corporate brand assets comes from stable salary income from stable corporate cash flow generated by high-quality corporate brand assets (Wei and Xu, 2016; Zhang and Liu, 2018). However, tighter financing constraints can hinder stable operations and cash flow generation and, thus, employee brand equity. FinTech[1] has emerged as a prominent novel solution to these problems and can become a new lifeline of SMEs and their brand equity. Specifically, it can ease financing constraints for enterprises (Klapper et al., 2019; Yin et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2020). FinTech can be very valuable tool for enhancing brand equity by easing financing constrains. As an essential supplement to the traditional financial system, FinTech is characterized by inclusiveness (Hsu et al., 2014) and remolding (Yang, 2018). It performs a vital role in business development by providing real businesses with finance to perform resource allocation functions (Xue and Hu, 2020). Moreover, the wide application of cutting-edge technologies, such as cloud computing, blockchain, big data, and artificial intelligence, has promoted the rapid rise of the digital finance or FinTech industry. For example, artificial intelligence (He et al., 2022) and enterprise intelligence (Zhang and Li, 2022) may radically transform traditional labor relations between employees and enterprises. Importantly, by improving the financing environment for SMEs, FinTech can revive employees' confidence in corporate brand assets, and thus, is likely to be an essential factor that affects employee brand equity. Therefore, understanding the relationship between FinTech and employee brand equity, and mechanisms underlying this relationship is important.

The concept of brand equity is the clarity to quantify and measure the strengths and weaknesses of brands at all levels of finance, market competition, and consumer mindset, and to provide decision support for brand managers; that is, different conceptual models providing clarity under differentiated research perspectives. The development of financial technology has penetrated digital logic to all levels of society, including the communication of brands and the formation of brand equity. Given this context, we need to understand how the conceptual model of brand equity needs to adapt to digital changes. Digital brand equity currently exists as a distortion of the traditional model (Wang et al., 2020), which only quantifies the brand-consumer relationship without considering the brand's digital content and the value of the producer. For example, some studies discuss the impact of product innovativeness (Qu, 2022), market share (Zhang and Ye, 2021), advertising, and R&D investment (Chu and Keh, 2006; Peterson and Jeong, 2010; Mai and Li, 2016) on corporate brand equity enhancement. However, brand equity should not ignore producers' contribution and emotional devotion. Especially after the addition of FinTech and now social media, the emotional orientation of corporate employees towards brand equity is likely to outweigh the influence of other individual behaviors. Therefore, focusing more on employees' perception of brand equity and FinTech's effect on it is an exciting research topic.

Our work differs from the extant literature in the following ways: First, a crucial role of FinTech is how it can affect employee brand equity by adjusting financing constraints. To the best of our knowledge, few studies have compared and analyzed FinTech alone as a variable influencing employee brand equity. Second, we consider how these relationships change with the nature of enterprises' property rights and which economic region of the country they are located in. Specifically, commercial banks are more inclined to lend to state-owned enterprises (SOE) than private ones, or that some Chinese regions are economically more developed than other regions. Thus, there may be heterogeneity in our results. Considering these factors can be useful for measuring China's economic development and the capital agglomeration effect of listed companies. The rest of this study proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops our hypotheses. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Section 4 describes the empirical and robustness check results. Finally, Section 5 presents the conclusions of this study.

1 The Financial Stability Board (FSB) proposed that financial technology is based on a series of technological innovations, such as big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and blockchain, and fully applicable to six major financial fields, including payment clearing, loan financing, wealth management, retail banking, insurance, and transaction settlement. Indeed, it will be the mainstream in the financial industry in the future (Du et al., 2021).

Literature review and theoretical hypotheses

Literature review

Brand equity

The establishment of brand awareness (Zhang et al., 2015) and brand image (Seo and Park, 2018) are symbolic achievements to attract consumers or employees to regard them as their preferred brand. In the past, most relevant studies were based on the two bedding of Customer-Based-Brand Equity (CBBE) and Sales-Based-Brand-Equity (SBBE; Datta et al., 2017). CBBE means the attractiveness of brand names or symbols to consumers, a type of value transfer at the bedding of consumer perception (Godey et al., 2016). For example, Nawi et al. (2022) examined how the social media marketing of a mobile brand affects the brand equity, relationship equity, and value equity of customers. Based on the mediating role of brand equity and brand identity, Farzin et al. (2022) researched the influence of social media marketing and eWOM on consumers' willingness to pay premiums. Amoako (2022) extends the applicability of brand equity as a mediating variable to enhance the impact of location and service mart availability on purchasing behavior of customers. Researchers agree that these factors and concerning studies have solved some issues in the construction of brand equity value from the perspective of customers. However, these studies still have some limitations. So some other scholars studied from the dimension of SBBE. SBBE refers to the impact of internal brand construction on the brand support of employees. Previously, only early or few studies have revealed the perception of employees in the critical areas of internal brand construction. Therefore, it is significant to study this field further.

Employee-based brand equity

The importance of employees in establishing strong brand equity was widely emphasized in past years. Recently, a study by Raj (2020) has reported on how internal brand construction has become a human resources (HR) structure for creating, implementing, and measuring an employee-based brand image in an organization. By interviewing 443 respondents from various industries, researchers analyzed how internal brand strategies help employees improve employee identity with the brand image in terms of psychology, physics, spirit, finance, and social welfare. According to the study by Kahn (1992), employee engagement is a multidimensional index, and employees can get involved in the organization through emotional, cognitive, and physical behaviors. Shuck and Reio (2014) explained the phenomenon that poor labor force participation causes damage to organizations, which means that employees with high participation have a higher happiness index. Besides employee engagement, the investment in employee benefits may also improve productivity and employee morale. A job survey of professionals in Indian IT firms studied the relationship between employee welfare and employment participation (Sivapragasam and Raya, 2018). This study revealed a statistically significant relationship between production and employee incentive.

Employee brand equity and salary incentives

Human capital is a core element in an enterprise's internal governance (Sun et al., 2021). Compensation incentives are vital for top executives to influence technological innovation decisions (Guo et al., 2019). Furthermore, monetary compensation incentives for general employees positively affect R&D investment in listed companies (Tang and Zhen, 2009). These observations are supported by extant research, including research on the level of compensation of general employees (Wang and Liu, 2008; Guo and Lu, 2011; Ye et al., 2013) and executives (Zhang et al., 2003; Ruan et al., 2013; Shi and Cheng, 2022). Interestingly, some find that general employee compensation contributes more significantly to the creation of value added by the enterprise (Zhu et al., 2017). Therefore, salary incentive is an essential dimension in studying enterprise management and brand equity. After then, this paper will apply worker salary as a measure of employee brand equity to conduct the subsequent research.

Employee brand equity and FinTech applications

Empirical evidence shows that the development of digital technologies, such as big data and cloud computing, provides application scenarios for digital finance. This can be important for improving the corporate financing environment and promoting corporate innovation development (He and Liu, 2022; Wang and Wang, 2022). Some entrepreneurs are involved in constructing or using FinTech teams to meet the needs of the times and industrial upgrading. That means the management has a reasonable expectation of the prospects of FinTech, which requires meeting two conditions simultaneously: First, the excess return (or expected return) the enterprises earn from developing FinTech should exceed the total R&D investments in it. Second, the ratio of the excess salary paid by the enterprises for FinTech development to the current operating income should be slightly higher than the ratio of the employee salary to the operating income in the previous financial year. This assertion is in line with the fact that the share of social labor income has continued to rise since 2011 (Lu and Tian, 2020).

Meanwhile, naysayers may not see the company's future in FinTech or perhaps it does not have sufficient and reasonable financial budgets to support FinTech-focused R&D. Still, to avoid competitors encroaching on their market share, managers may passively increase FinTech investments. If the enterprise succeeds in research and development, it will follow the supporters' path. Otherwise, if the enterprise cannot make ends meet for an extended period, its capital gap may lead to a shrinking market share. In severe cases, it may directly lead to bankruptcy and liquidation. These enterprises cannot continue to operate because it does not meet the goal of no listed company may earn negative income for two consecutive years (Shanghai Stock Exchange Stock Listing Rules (Revised December 2020), page 84–110), thus, we do

not discuss them. Therefore, more employee compensation can facilitate the growth of FinTech.[2]

Theoretical hypotheses

The cash provides security for long-term business activities. Some scholars discussed the impact of financing constraints on firm technological innovation (Ju et al., 2013) and technological R&D (Lian and Su, 2009; Cai et al., 2012) and concluded that financing constraints have a significant inverse effect on the latter. Shao and Hu (2022) note that FinTech affects enterprises' investment efficiency through two types of mediating variables: "financing constraints and financial expense ratio" and "debt leverage and risk stability." Lu and Liu (2018) suggest that FinTech innovation (e.g., big data and cloud computing) can translate resource allocation efficiency into real productivity by reducing the search and transmission costs of financial resources, alleviating information asymmetry, and lowering enterprises' financing costs to achieve this. However, enterprises also need to appropriately compensate FinTech employees to retain them. Given the extensive literature on FinTech and financing constraints (Lu and Liu, 2018; Deng and Zhao, 2022; Shao and Hu, 2022; Wang et al., 2022), we seek to examine how financing constraints affect the relationship between FinTech and enterprise's brand equity. Specifically, FinTech may mitigate financing constraints, and thus, aid corporate revenue; this enhanced revenue serves as a good proxy for employees' recognition of corporate brand equity. To verify this conjecture, we need to separately examine the theoretical transmission mechanism between "FinTech and financing constraints" and "financing constraints and employee brand equity."

From the cross-matrix perspective of FinTech and inclusive finance, Hu and Cheng (2020) argue that FinTech will disrupt and fully penetrate the field of financial inclusion (such as payment and settlement, lending and financing, investment and wealth management, risk management, financial supervision, etc.). On the one hand, financial capital provided by FinTech builds the bridge for industrial restructuring and regional economic linkage (Yang and Zhang, 2018). On the other hand, FinTech provides efficient, convenient, and reliable market-oriented services to the real economy by improving the efficiency of capital allocation and optimizing the asset structure. Intermediaries may pose a significant threat to the financing environment, technology development, etc., of enterprises under the traditional financial operating model. Their excessive market participation can lead to common drawbacks such as opaque information, short time frame, and inefficient marketization (Zhang and Zhao, 2019). However, FinTech can help in overcoming the development dilemma of inclusive finance and alleviating the financing difficulties of SMEs (Huang and Huang, 2018). First, FinTech can effectively reduce the cost of information search and the timely discovery of the intrinsic value of innovation. Second, it can improve the level of innovation output of enterprises by easing financing constraints, and reducing financial expenses and financial leverage (Wang et al., 2019). Finally, it can improve and promote the credit and maturity structure of the credit segment and enhance the level of risk-taking in the banking industry by intensifying interbank competition behavior (Sun et al., 2020). Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed.

> *Hypothesis 1 (H1):* FinTech can significantly decrease the financing constraints of enterprises.

Next, we will discuss the relationship between financing constraints and employee brand equity. Neumeyer and Perri (2005), the earliest proponents of the theory of working capital, believe that rising market interest rate will reduce the borrowing capital, working capital, labor demand, and labor wages of the enterprises, while raising labor income and employee brand equity. Subsequently, inspired by the previous findings, Kabaca (2009) proposed the transmission mechanism of "interest rate $\rightarrow$ working capital $\rightarrow$ labor income." When enterprises need not borrow funds from the market ($\theta = 0$), the labor income can be equivalent to the labor output elasticity; otherwise, it has a negative relationship with the market interest rate. However, this hypothesis is applicable only when the sample covers sufficient period and cannot be used to explain the short-term trend of China's labor income. After that, Aziz and Cui (2007) proposed the indicator φ to reflect the degree of financial easing to represent the labor income, which can reflect employee brand equity (BE) as follows.

$$BE = \frac{\varphi\beta}{\gamma}\left[\frac{\gamma}{\beta} - (1-\delta) + \varphi\right] \tag{1}$$

Where β refers to the discount rate, δ refers to the depreciation rate, and γ represents technological progress. Assuming that an enterprise's entire working capital comes from borrowing and financing, easing represents the ratio between working capital and capital stock. Then, there will be a forward correlation between the degree of financing easing and the size of capital (or labor income). This reveals the positive relationship between financing constraints and brand equity. Zhu and Zhao (2016) propose a mechanism of the impact of financing constraints on the labor income of enterprises based on the idea of "Liquid capital constraints." Specifically, the enterprise's working capital decreases as the financing constraint increases, which constrains the allocation of profits to factors of production. Enterprises can only raise working capital through internal savings when faced with external market financing difficulties. However, in the long run, this will hinder the enterprise from appropriately

2 We assumed that most employees participate in the workforce to receive a paycheck. Thus, employees' recognition of the enterprise's brand value will be improved when they get more pay; On the contrary, the employees' recognition will decrease when the remuneration decreases.

compensating employees. Suppose the capital accumulation equation is $K_{i,t}^{s} = k_{i,t-2}^{s} + 1\theta_{i,t-2}^{s}$. Next, consider a condition when the enterprises may encounter financing constraints. For instance, when an enterprise takes out a loan to pay all employees or places a cap on working capital, the total amount of payroll should not exceed the loan limit it can obtain. Note that the limit is subject to the total value of all asset's collateral. That is:

$$w_t L_{i,t}^{s} \le \vartheta K_{i,t}^{s} \tag{2}$$

The enterprises have the goal of profit maximization and are characterized by size preference. We assume that for enterprise i , the price of the product is $P_{i,t}^{s}$; the product demandis $Y_{i,t}^{s}$; the enterprise's labor capital is $L_{i,t}^{s}$; the enterprise's size preference is $\theta_{i,t}^{s}$, with $\theta_{i,t}^{s} \in [0,1]$; the Lagrange multiplier of the credit constraint is λ , with $\lambda > 0$; the demand elasticity of the product is δ , with $\delta > 1$; the factor allocation parameter of the industry s is α ; the technical efficiency of capital cost is A_t ; and the unit price of labor cost is W_t . Then, the employee brand equity (BE) at time t is expressed as follows:

$$BE = \frac{W_t L_{i,t}^{s}}{P_{i,t}^{s} Y_{i,t}^{s}} = \frac{\delta - 1}{\delta\left(1 - \theta_{i,t}^{s} + \lambda\right)}\left[1 - \alpha\left(\frac{A_t K_{i,t-1}^{s}}{Y_{i,t}^{s}}\right)^{\frac{\delta-1}{\delta}}\right] \tag{3}$$

If equation (2) holds, when the financing constraints increase, the denominator on the right-hand side of the equation (3) increases and BE decreases. Therefore, *ceteris paribus*, the following hypothesis is proposed.

> *Hypothesis 2 (H2):* Financing constraints can significantly restrain employee brand equity.

Methodology

Variable selection

We use the ratio of "cash paid to and for employees to total operating income" in the cash flow statement to measure the employee income and regard it as the employee brand equity (BE) from a micro perspective (Wang and Huang, 2017; Wang and Mao, 2019). Referring to Huang et al. (2020), financing constraint (SA) is a mediating variable.

$$SA = -0.737 \times Ln(Asset) + 0.043 \times Ln(Asset)^2 - 0.04 \times Time \tag{4}$$

Where $Asset$ refers to the total assets and $Time$ refers to the age of the enterprise. Following Qiu et al., 2018, we take the digital finance index published by the Digital Finance Research Center of Peking University as our key explanatory variable. This index quantitatively depicts stage of innovation of Internet or digital finance in China, and thus, along with its different dimensions, is a good proxy for the level of FinTech development in China by industry. The control variables and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. Among factors not defined before, asset-liability ratio, capital intensity, return on total assets, enterprise growth (dummy variable), and nature of equity (dummy variable) are adopted as variables as in Wang and Huang (2017) and Wang and Mao (2019). Meanwhile, equity concentration is adopted from Shi et al. (2019) and measures the equity distribution of listed companies.

Research model

As mentioned before, there are specific time, region, and industry effects among the mediating variables, explanatory, and explained variables. To more concretely explore how financing constraints play a specific mediating role, we refer to Xu et al.'s (2020) theoretical model and construct the following analytical model:

$$\begin{aligned} BE_{i,n,t} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 FIN_{i,n,t} + \sum_{k=1}^{6} \gamma_k Control_{i,n,t} \\ + \mu_i + \nu_t + \varphi_n + \varepsilon_{i,n,t} \end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

TABLE 1 Summary of variables.

Type of variables	Name of variables	Symbol	Descriptions
Explained	Employee brand equity	BE	Employee compensation/total operating income
Explanatory	FinTech	FIN	Digital Financial Inclusion Index of Peking University
Mediating	Financing constraints	SA	Refer to equation (4) for details
Control	Asset-liability ratio	LEV	Total liabilities/total assets
	Capital intensity	CI	Total assets/operating income
	Return on total assets	ROA	Net profit/total assets
	Enterprise growth	Growth	Equals 1 for positive total asset growth rate; otherwise, equals 0.
	Equity concentration	SC	Shareholding ratio of top ten shareholders
	Equity nature	SOE	1 for SOEs, 0 for non-SOEs

Where BE represents the employee brand equity; FIN represents FinTech; $Control$ represents the six control variables $LEV, CI, ROA, Growth, SC$, and SOE; $\propto$ represents the regional fixed effect that does not change with time and industry; v represents the time fixed effect that does not change with province and industry; φ represents the industry fixed effect that does not change with time and province; and ε represents the random disturbance term. β_1, β_2, and γ_k (k = 1, 2, …, 6) are all coefficients, and the subscripts i, n, and t represent province, industry, and year, respectively.

Data source

We take balanced panel data of 31 provinces in China (including autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government, excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan) from 2011 to 2019. This time period is chosen for two reasons. First, the only complete interval of the FinTech index we used was 2011–2019. Second, at the end of 2019, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed some aspect or the other, which may make the previous regularity unsustainable. We hope to use this study as a pre-pandemic reference for comparison and discussion by subsequent researchers. Except for the FinTech index, all required measurement indicators for control, explanatory, and explained variables are taken from the CSMAR database. The Pearson correlation coefficient between variables is small (refer to Table 2 for details), indicating that the regression model does not suffer from collinearity. Stata 16.0 was used for data processing.

Result and discussion

Descriptive statistics for main variables

The descriptive statistics for variables are reported in Table 3. First, asset-liability ratio varies between 0.008 and 18.84, with an average value of 0.44. This indicates that the creativity of various economic units varies significantly in China. The mean values of capital intensity and return on total assets are 6.4 and 3.6, respectively, and have standard deviations of 230.3 and 10.8, respectively. This indicates that the operating efficiency and earning capacity of listed companies varies substantially, and the development of the whole market is uneven. Enterprise growth and nature of equity are dummies with mean values of 0.8 and 0.3, respectively. The former shows a significant increase in the total assets of listed companies. The latter shows that the number of non-SOEs is roughly twice that of SOEs in our sample. Finally, the mean equity concentration is 0.60, indicating that the top 10 shareholders have significant control over Chinese listed companies.

Benchmark regression

We complete the estimation of the benchmark regression by following several steps. First, we test the relationship between FinTech, and employee brand equity and financing constraints separately. The results without controls in Columns (1) and (2) of Table 4, respectively show that FinTech positively and negatively affects employee brand equity and financing constraints, respectively. The result of FinTech's statistically significant positive effect on employee brand equity at the statistical level is in line with our expectations. In comparison, the results of the negative effect of FinTech on financing constraints in a statistically significant way are in line with the findings of Huang et al. (2020) and Deng and Zhao (2022). Second, when we consider FinTech and financing constraints as explanatory variables of employee brand equity [Column (3)], financing constraints negatively affect employee brand equity. That is, the relationship between employee brand equity and corporate financing constraints is an inverse variation. Employee brand equity decreases when a firm's financing constraint increases, and employee brand equity decreases; conversely, employee brand equity increases when a firm's

TABLE 2 Pearson correlation analysis.

Coefficient	BE	SA	FIN	LEV	CI	ROA	Growth	SC	SOE
BE	1.00								
SA	−0.11	1.00							
FIN	0.08	0.11	1.00						
LEV	−0.06	0.33	−0.02	1.00					
CI	0.07	0.02	0.01	0.01	1.00				
ROA	−0.05	−0.01	−0.04	−0.44	−0.01	1.00			
Growth	−0.05	0.07	−0.06	−0.08	0.01	0.27	1.00		
SC	−0.04	0.18	0.02	−0.09	0.01	0.17	0.16	1.00	
SOE	−0.04	0.34	−0.09	0.22	0.00	−0.05	−0.08	−0.04	1.00

BE, Employee brand equity; FIN, FinTech; SA, Financing constraints; LEV, Asset-liability ratio; CI, Capital intensity, ROA, return on total assets; Growth, enterprise growth; SC, equity concentration; and SOE, equity nature.

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics for variables.

Symbol	Number of observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimal value	Maximal value
BE	18,126	13.9	17.3	0.1	1605.1
FIN	18,126	239.2	94.6	16.2	410.3
SA	18,126	4.4	1.9	−1.7	17.7
LEV	18,126	44.4	31.1	0.8	1883.8
CI	18,126	6.4	230.3	0.1	25084.4
ROA	18,126	3.6	10.8	−677.6	86.4
Growth	18,126	0.8	0.4	0.0	1.0
SC	18,126	59.8	16.0	1.3	101.2
SOE	18,126	0.3	0.5	0.0	1.0

BE, employee brand equity; FIN, FinTech; SA, financing constraints; LEV, asset-liability ratio; CI, capital intensity; ROA, return on total assets; Growth, enterprise growth; SC, equity concentration; and SOE, equity nature.

TABLE 4 Regression results of benchmark model.

Serial number	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variable name	BE	SA	BE	BE	SA	BE
FIN	0.052**	−0.003**	0.048**	0.0529**	−0.028**	0.049***
	(2.69)	(−3.08)	(2.61)	(2.87)	(−3.13)	(2.75)
SA			−1.639***			−1.469***
			(−12.33)			(−8.29)
Constant	1.414	5.079***	9.736**	6.920	3.145***	11.539**
	(0.30)	(23.39)	(2.44)	(1.47)	(9.65)	(2.90)
Controls	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Regional effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adj.R^2	0.1232	0.4505	0.1416	0.1346	0.5312	0.1472
F Value	7.21	9.46	102.29	288.12	3285.86	1403.02
N	18,126	18,126	18,126	18,126	18,126	18,126

t-values are in parentheses. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$. Controls refer to six control variables: LEV, CI, ROA, Growth, SC, and SOE. BE, employee brand equity; FIN, FinTech; SA, financing constraints; LEV, asset-liability ratio; CI, capital intensity; ROA, return on total assets; Growth, enterprise growth; SC, equity concentration; and SOE, equity nature.

financing constraint decreases. It could be exciting news, which shows a new factor in increasing the company's employee brand equity. Third, the coefficient of FinTech in Column (3) is slightly smaller than that in Column (1), indicating that financing constraints are indeed the mediating variable between FinTech and employee brand equity. To ensure the validity of the results, we add six control variables: LEV, CI, ROA, Growth, SC, and SOE. Columns (4–6) of Table 4 list the result. We do not report test results for individual control variables as they are not the focus of this paper. Again, the results after adding controls are qualitatively similar to our prior results, indicating their reliability.

Robustness test

To ensure the robustness of our results, we test the possible adverse effects of endogeneity and outlier problems on the primary estimation results.

Endogeneity test

We use the one-period lag term of the independent variable as another independent variable in our estimation to test any contemporaneous correlation of the residual terms. The estimation equation is as follows:

$$BE_{i,n,t} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 FIN_{i,n,t} + \beta_3 BE_{i,n,t-1} + \sum_{k=1}^{6} \gamma_k Control_{i,n,t} + \mu_i + v_t + \varphi_n + \varepsilon_{i,n,t} \quad (6)$$

Difference (DIF) Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) and System-GMM (SYS-GMM) are two conventional approaches to dealing with dynamic panel models such as ours. However, the former is susceptible to weak instrumental variables, producing slight sample bias (Blundell and Bond, 1998; Bond et al., 2001). Researchers usually take the two-step SYS-GMM. Column (5) of Table 5 reports the results for Model

TABLE 5 Robustness estimation.

Explained variable: BE	(4)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Variable name	**FE**	**IV-Lag**	**IV-Lag-R**	**SYS-GMM**	**Outliers**
FIN	0.053**	0.008***	0.019**	0.007***	0.024***
	(2.87)	(10.06)	(2.76)	(4.94)	(4.25)
L.BE				0.145 (1.29)	
Constant	6.920	14.454***	16.706***	10.761***	11.518***
	(1.47)	(20.40)	(10.39)	(6.48)	(8.34)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
p value of Hansen Test				0.000	
p value of Difference—in—Hansen				0.000[a]	
Test				0.000[b]	
p value of AR (1) test				0.025	
- *p* value of AR (2) test				0.828	
N	18,126	15,477	15,477	15,477	17,764

Control group: Models (7)–(9) take the one-period lag values of the explanatory variables, and use all control variables; the SYS-GMM estimation adopts heteroskedasticity robust standard error to correct the *t*-values. The difference and level equation instrumental variable is FIN. The lag period of other variables is only applied to the instrumental variables of the difference equation and the lag orders take (1, 3). *a* and *b* are the probabilities for testing the validity of additional instrumental variables of the level and difference equations, respectively; outliers take the truncation regression of BE at 1 and 99% quantiles. *t* values are in parentheses. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, and *$p < 0.1$. Controls refer to control variables: LEV, CI, ROA, Growth, SC, and SOE. BE, employee brand equity; FIN, FinTech; SA, financing constraints; LEV, asset-liability ratio; CI, capital intensity; ROA, return on total assets; Growth, enterprise growth; SC, equity concentration; and SOE, equity nature.

(9) with SYS-GMM. The significance of Arellano-Bond AR (1) and AR (2) tests are 0.025 and 0.828, respectively, indicating that the difference of error term only has no autocorrelation, indicating that SYS-GMM is feasible. In addition, the estimated value of the SYS GMM should be between the ordinary least squares (OLS) and fixed effect estimates (Bond et al., 2001). The regression coefficient of lagged term is 0.145, which is just between the upper and lower limits of the regression coefficient (0.350, *t*-value of 75.62; 0.093, *t*-value of 22.05, respectively), indicating that the estimates are valid.

Outlier test

With the large sample size of China's stock market and the diverse characteristics of enterprise development, greater heterogeneity in the employee brand equity may result in greater effect of outliers on the results. Therefore, we winsorize BE data at the 1 and 99% quantiles and conduct the fixed effect test again. Table 5 shows the result of the model (10). The coefficient of FinTech remains predominant, showing the reliability of previous estimates.

Further study

Since the digital inclusive finance index has strong spatial agglomeration and heterogeneity (Guo et al., 2020), we classify it based on two dimensions: the nature of property right and regional economic heterogeneity. We obtained some interesting insights (Table 6). First, SOEs' financing constraints have significantly weaker inhibitory effect on the labor income share than that for non-SOEs. This may be due to differences in the industry environment for these two types of enterprises. Specifically, due to the further implementation of China's "deleveraging" reforms, the scale of lending of state-owned commercial banks has gradually tightened since 2018. Simultaneously, China's economic situation improved, and the size and number of private enterprises grew markedly. Consequently, there was a massive gap in market financing. In addition, the financing environment also differs for SOEs and non-SOEs. Non-SOEs are subject to significant credit and budget constraints and find it difficult to raise sufficient funds from the financial sector to deal with short-term debt challenges. Then, they alleviate current liquidity problems by reducing labor costs. By contrast, state-owned enterprises may have few such concerns.

Second, the financing constraints have the most significant restraining effect on employee brand equity for private enterprises in the eastern region, followed by the central, western, and northeast region. This may because the eastern region is highly market-oriented, with less macro intervention and weaker financial repression for listed companies. Under intensifying financing constraints, shareholders from other regions may take more market risks when compared to the eastern region. Shareholders may be the biggest beneficiaries if the factors shift. For example, FinTech development has eased the financing constraints of the enterprise. In addition, the number of listed companies in the eastern region far exceeds that in other regions, indicating that the eastern coastal region has more choices than the latter in consumption and allocation of social resources.

Third, the influence behavior of FinTech on employee brand equity shows regional heterogeneity. While FinTech development significantly promotes employee brand equity for all enterprises in the eastern region, this phenomenon is only observed for private enterprises in the western region. Rather, for SOEs in the

TABLE 6 Further research.

BE	Northeast China		Western Region		Eastern China		Central China	
	SE	PE	SE	PE	SE	PE	SE	PE
FIN	0.077	−0.223	0.008	0.080**	0.066***	0.033**	−0.052**	0.000
	(0.38)	(−1.65)	(0.13)	(2.65)	(5.28)	(2.72)	(−2.44)	(−0.01)
SA	−0.981	−2.131***	−0.923	−1.876***	−1.056***	−1.297***	−0.748***	−1.863***
	(−1.17)	(−4.82)	(−1.16)	(−5.07)	(−11.84)	(−13.62)	(−4.00)	(−6.77)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.558	0.566	0.547	0.970	0.424	0.244	0.772	0.546
N	364	392	740	1,176	3,981	9,242	906	1,319

t value in parentheses. ***$p<0.01$, **$p<0.05$, and *$p<0.1$. Controls refer to control variables: LEV, CI, ROA, Growth, SC, and SOE. SE, state-owned enterprise; PE, private enterprise; BE, employee brand equity; FIN, FinTech; SA, financing constraints; LEV, asset-liability ratio; CI, capital intensity; ROA, Return on total assets; Growth, enterprise growth; SC, equity concentration; and SOE, equity nature.

central region, it even has a negative effect. This may be because SOEs have many financing channels. For example, SOEs may enjoy preferential policies in terms of finance and taxation. Therefore, FinTech's on SOEs' economic activities may be limited. Besides, FinTech can break the information barrier between enterprises and financial institutions. This may greatly alleviate financing constraints for private enterprises, who generally suffer from a lack of credit as lenders find it difficult to effectively identify potential external default risks associated with private enterprises (Liu et al., 2019). Moreover, due to their political goals and economic interests, SOEs may prefer productive activities with short cycles and high performance. Then, FinTech development may be especially helpful for private enterprises who have long suffered from institutional discrimination. Thus, the external driving force of FinTech in technological innovation should be slightly more vital in private enterprises than in SOEs.

Study limitations

The employee compensation incentive could reflect the identity of employees with brand equity. However, it is not a comprehensive index because it neglects other dimensions that affect brand equity, such as working environment, corporate culture, work intensity, and especially consumer identity, which is a hot topic and factor. Researchers downplay the role of these factors to highlight the unique value of compensation incentives in brand equity management within firms. In addition, the application value of FinTech in employee brand equity management is the most concerned topic in this paper. The reasonable estimation of the FinTech index is still a controversial and continuous issue. Since the index researchers apply is only a part of FinTech development in China, some ignored application limitations will reduce the suitable range and application value. Meanwhile, it is also a future research orientation.

Conclusion

Using panel data on listed companies from 31 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions in China from 2011 to 2019, we find that FinTech's development helps improve employee brand equity. This relationship is mediated by financing constraints. Specifically, FinTech's development promotes social employee brand equity by easing financing constraints for enterprises. Furthermore, the inhibiting effect of financing constraints on employee brand equity has apparent cross-enterprise heterogeneity. Specifically, this inhibiting effect is stronger on the employee brand equity of non-SOEs than that of SOEs, while there is no significant effect on enterprises in the western and northeastern regions. The transmission effect of FinTech on employee brand equity also shows cross-regional heterogeneity. While FinTech development benefits employee brand equity for all enterprises in the eastern region, it only benefits private enterprises in the western region. Moreover, FinTech development even has a significant inhibiting effect on SOEs in the central region.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

LL contributed to the conception, methodology, and manuscript. ZH contributed to data curation, software, and review. XJ verified the data and methodology. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Research on the influence of team psychological capital on team members' work performance

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Team psychological capital is the positive psychological state of a team and has a positive impact on the human resource management and performance management of the team. Team members' work performance, as a component of team performance, has an important impact on improving team performance. However, there is less cross-level impact analysis between the two. The purpose of this paper is to explore the mechanisms of the cross-level effects of team psychological capital on members' performance. A paired questionnaire survey was administered to 387 human resource management team members from 86 human resource management teams across China, and SPSS 22.0, AMOS 23.0, and HLM 6.08 software were used to analyze the questionnaire data at the same level and across levels. The test shows that the cross-level positive effect of team psychological capital on team members' work performance is established, and the cross-level mediating role of team members' psychological capital and team support between the two is established. It enriches the cross-level research from team to individual, refines and enriches the research on the impact of team psychological capital on individual behavior, and provides new ideas for team management in companies. Therefore, when conducting team management, enterprises can enhance team members' psychological capital by improving team psychological capital, thereby improving team members' work performance and team efficiency.

KEYWORDS

cross-level analysis, team members' work performance, team psychological capital, team members' psychological capital, team support

Introduction

According to a report from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, during the "14th Five-Year Plan" period, with the new round of industrial division of labor and the reorganization of the global trade pattern, China's economic development shifted from scale growth to improving quality and seizing the new world of the global industrial revolution.

It is very important to seize opportunities, promote high-quality development of the industry, and occupy the commanding heights of global industrial development. In this case, the complexity of the business environment makes the competition faced by enterprises more intense, and organizational performance has become a key factor in enhancing a company's competitive advantage. The improvement of organizational performance not only enables employees to increase wages but also improves organizational efficiency, thereby promoting innovation in production technology. As an integral part of organizational performance, employee performance will also have a significant impact in the process of improving organizational performance. Many studies have shown that team psychological capital plays a vital role in team members' work performance.

Psychological capital is a positive psychological state and is present when an individual is faced with tasks, performance, and success, which occurs in specific situations and can be enhanced through conscious development, thus increasing individual competitiveness. Luthans classifies psychological capital into four dimensions: self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience. Most scholars believe that team psychological capital is formed and developed based on individual psychological capital; therefore, the dimensions of team psychological capital are consistent with those of individual psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007). The role of team psychological capital in organizational development is receiving increasing attention, and it has a significant positive impact on human resource development, organizational performance and the ability of teams to innovate. Tang (2020) found a strong strategic and corporate link between PsyCap and HRD, which has important implications for business development (Tang, 2020). A study by Tho and Duc (2021) demonstrated the positive effect of team psychological capital on a team's ability to innovate (Tho and Duc, 2021).

In the context of the deepening development of the market economy and in the face of fierce market competition, enterprises must improve the cohesion of their teams, enhance the sense of responsibility of team employees and bring into play the convergence effect of team members. As the scale of operations continues to expand and the number of employees continues to increase, enterprises must adjust their team management model according to the stage of development to reduce management costs and improve management efficiency. The objective of this paper is to investigate the cross-level influence of team psychological capital on employee performance and the mediating role of team support and individual psychological capital in between. In turn, this paper provides a reliable way for companies to build psychological capital from a team management perspective and thereby improve the performance of team members.

Ulrich (1996) suggests that the HRM function contributes to strategy implementation and value creation and that HR managers should play four classic roles: administrative expert, change agent, employee advocate and strategic partner. Gao et al. (2016) discuss six roles that HR should play in the Chinese context in the areas of strategy, operations, and people: enabler, supporter, advisor, partner, caretaker, and motivator. As such, human resource managers play an important role in the management and administration of the organization's business strategy and the achievement of management objectives (Erxiu et al., 2012; Liping and Linying, 2019).

On this basis, scientific and reasonable countermeasures and suggestions are put forward to improve team members' work performance and enhance the company's core competitiveness.

Literature review and research hypothesis

The influence of team psychological capital on team members' work performance

Team psychological capital is developed based on individual psychological capital, which can not only show the general individual psychological characteristics of team members but also show the integration and particularity of team psychology. Team psychological capital is a series of psychological qualities and characteristics that can enhance team creativity. It is formed by the collaborative and intensive interaction of team members' psychological tacit understanding and positive psychological state and then by giving full play to team's integrated advantages. Related research on psychological capital includes not only the exploration of its antecedent variables but also the exploration of its outcome variables. There has been research on the impact of individual psychological capital on individual performance and the impact of team psychological capital on team performance. In terms of the impact of individual psychological capital on individual performance, Erxiu et al. (2012) used innovation performance as a result variable to explore the impact mechanism of knowledge-based employees' psychological capital on innovation performance; Yanyun et al. (2019) found that employees' psychological capital in state-owned construction firms positively influenced their job performance; Bogler and Somech (2019) examined the positive correlation between team psychological capital and organizational citizenship behavior, which is an important part of work performance; and Jinfeng et al. (2021) found that team psychological capital has a positive impact on individual innovative work behavior, which can promote job performance (Rebelo et al., 2018; Bogler and Somech, 2019; Jinfeng et al., 2021; Paliga et al., 2022). In terms of the impact of team psychological capital on team performance, Liping and Linying (2019) found that team psychological capital has a significant impact on team innovation performance. Rebelo et al. (2018) found that team psychological capital positively affects team performance. Paliga et al. (2022) proved the correlative relationship between psychological capital and job performance at both the individual and team levels (Vanno et al., 2014; Xiaoyun, 2019; Yan et al., 2022). At the same time, Xiaoman et al. (2022)

show that team-level variables, such as team psychological capital, have a corresponding effect on individual employee-level variables (Okros and Vîrgă, 2022). Team psychological capital has an impact on team members' work performance that cannot be underestimated.

Accordingly, this article proposes the following hypotheses:

> *H1*: Team psychological capital has a significant impact on team members' work performance.

The mediating role of team members' psychological capital

Team psychological capital is developed based on individual psychological capital. At present, most scholars agree that the dimensions of team psychological capital are the same as those of individual psychological capital. Team psychological capital consists of two levels: the individual level and the group level. The four dimensions of team psychological capital correspond to and are positively correlated with the four dimensions of individual psychological capital (Vanno et al., 2014).

Accordingly, this article proposes the following hypotheses:

> *H2*: Team psychological capital is significantly positively correlated with team members' psychological capital.

There is a significant positive correlation between the psychological capital and work performance of managers of state-owned enterprises (Xiaoyun, 2019). Airline companies should focus more attention on team members' psychological capital, which is beneficial for their performance (Yan et al., 2022). The same conclusion was reached not only by Romanian correctional officers (Okros and Vîrgă, 2022) but also by employees from seven five-star hotels in China (Huang et al., 2021). Among them, the self-efficacy and resilience dimensions of psychological capital showed a strong positive correlation with the related dimensions of work performance. Relationship. The formation of intrinsic motivation of knowledge workers is positively affected by psychological capital, and it plays a mediating role in the relationship between knowledge workers' psychological capital and innovation performance; learning, relational, innovative psychological capital, and task-based psychological capital are positively correlated. In research on the influence of subordinates' psychological capital on the relationships between transformational leadership and satisfaction, subordinates' psychological capital was found to play a mediating role (Yang et al., 2012). The higher the subordinate's perception of procedural fairness is, the more likely that his or her psychological capital will be positively affected by transformational leadership. The greater the value is, the stronger the transmission effect of psychological capital between transformational leadership behavior and the performance and satisfaction of subordinates.

Accordingly, this article proposes the following hypotheses:

> *H3*: Team members' psychological capital is significantly positively correlated with team members' work performance.

> *H4*: Team members' psychological capital plays a mediating role in team psychological capital and team members' work performance.

The mediating role of team support

Organizational support evolves into team support, and the essence of team support is organizational support. Organizational support has a positive impact on psychological capital, which plays a mediating role between organizational support and work engagement (Jinhong and Hai, 2017). When observing the new generation of skilled workers in emerging industries, scholars have found that when they feel stronger organizational support, the positive correlation between psychological capital and work-life balance is stronger (Zhongze et al., 2019). Marashdah and Albdareen (2020) found that organizational support has a significant impact on team members' psychological capital (Marashdah and Albdareen, 2020). Bilgetürk and Baykal (2021) proposed that perceived organizational support will have a positive effect on the psychological capital of individuals (Bilgetürk and Baykal, 2021). Yuan et al. (2022) found that psychological capital has a positive correlation with perceptions of organizational support (Yuan et al., 2022).

Accordingly, this article proposes the following hypotheses:

> *H5*: Team psychological capital is significantly positively correlated with team support.

Several studies support the direct correlation between team support and team employees' job performance from different perspectives. Research by Fu (2019) shows that organizational support has a significant impact on employee performance (Fu, 2019). Xiaohui and Qun (2020) found that organizational support is significantly positively correlated with employee innovation performance (Xiaohui and Qun, 2020). Coll and Mignonac (2022) proposed that perceptions of organizational support by the disability group will yield higher levels of task performance (Coll and Mignonac, 2022).

Niantao and Xiangmin (2019) pointed out that the organizational support plays a moderating role in the relationship between the psychological capital and job satisfaction of hotel management interns (Niantao and Xiangmin, 2019). Li's (2022) research on scientific researchers found that their psychological capital and innovation performance were regulated by organizational support (Li, 2022).

Accordingly, this article proposes the following hypotheses:

H6: Team support is significantly positively correlated with team members' work performance.

H7: Team support plays a mediating role in team psychological capital and team members' work performance.

Methodology

Data collection and reliability testing

This research adopts the paired questionnaire method, which administers an individual questionnaire and a team questionnaire. First, the team-level questionnaires were numbered separately from the individual-level questionnaires. The numbering logic was that the team questionnaires were numbered 001, 002, and 003, while the first individual questionnaire within the team was numbered 001-1, 001-2, and 001-3 and so on. Once the questionnaires are numbered, the two questionnaires are sent to the leader of the HRM team, who organizes the completion of the questionnaires by the members within the team, with the individual questionnaires being completed by the members individually, and the team questionnaires being completed by the leader through discussion with the team members. Therefore, each team has its corresponding number, and this paper can match the team-level questionnaire with the team member-level questionnaire one by one according to this number. Once the questionnaires were completed, the questionnaire software was used to collect the questionnaire data, export the relevant data, and match the questionnaires according to the preprogrammed numbers.

The individual questionnaire includes the measurement of individual psychological capital and individual job performance, which is completed by employees themselves. The team questionnaire includes the measurement of team psychological capital and team support, which is completed by the team through discussion.

This study used the 24-item four-dimensional scale developed by Luthans et al. (2005) to measure team psychological capital and individual psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2005). Regarding the scale of team support, this study used the 17-item three-dimensional scale. Team members' job performance comprises role performance and organizational citizenship behavior. For the measurement of role performance, this study uses seven scales developed by Williams and Anderson (1991). To measure OCB, this study uses the short scale developed by Farh et al. (2007) in the context of mainland China, which contains three dimensions and nine items in total (Farh et al., 2007).

After testing, the above scales showed high reliability and validity. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of team psychological capital, team members' psychological capital, team members' work performance, and team support are all >0.8. This indicates that the scale selected in the presurvey is highly reliable and can be used for formal sample surveys. When the reliability of the scale reaches the standard, the validity of the scale needs to be tested by subsequent analysis.

This study not only carries out exploratory factor analysis on the scale but also carries out confirmatory factor analysis. In this study, SPSS 22.0 was used for exploratory factor analysis of the formal questionnaire, and AMOS 23.0 was used for confirmatory factor analysis.

The KMO values of the four scales of team psychological capital, team members' psychological capital, team support, and team members' work performance are 0.923, 0.942, 0.913, and 0.894, respectively, which are all >0.8 and are very close to 1, indicating that the above four scales are suitable for factor analysis.

The confirmatory factor analysis results of the second-order four-factor model (the second-order factor is team psychological capital, and the first-order factors are team efficacy, team optimism, team hope, and team toughness) are as follows: χ^2/df = 4.583, NFI = 0.917, RFI = 0.902, CFI = 0.953, and RMSEA = 0.803. The confirmatory factor analysis results of the second-order four-factor model (the second-order factor is team members' psychological capital, and the first-order factors are self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience) are as follows: χ^2/df = 4.694, NFI = 0.936, RFI = 0.924, CFI = 0.976, and RMSEA = 0.818. The confirmatory factor analysis results of the second-order three-factor model (the second-order factor is team support, and the first-order factors are employee value recognition, organizational support, and concern for benefits) are as follows: χ^2/df = 4.953, GFI = 0.933, RFI = 0.947, CFI = 0.958, and RMSEA = 0.813. The confirmatory factor analysis results of the second-order two-factor model (the second-order factors are team members' work performance, and the first-order factors are organizational citizenship behavior and in-role performance) are as follows: χ^2/df = 5.259, NFI = 0.913, RFI = 0.921, CFI = 0.956, and RMSEA = 0.809. All four scales show a high degree of construct validity.

Same level research variable test

For variables at the same level, such as team psychological capital and team support at the team level, the impact of individual team members' psychological capital and team members' work performance, AMOS 23.0 software was used for direct analysis. C.R. represents the critical ratio value, which is equivalent to the *t*-value. If the *t*-value is >1.95, the *p*-value is <0.05; if the *t*-value is >2.58, the *p*-value is <0.01. Table 1 shows that the standardized estimated value of team psychological capital for team support is 0.422, and the critical ratio value is 4.718, which is >2.58, indicating that the *p*-value is <0.01. After AMOS 23.0 analysis, the *p*-values of team psychological capital and team support were obtained. If it is <0.001, it satisfies the *p*-value condition required by the critical ratio value. In summary, team psychological capital has a significant impact on team support, and Hypothesis 5 is

TABLE 1 Model fitting index table.

	χ^2/df	NFI	RFI	CFI	RMSEA
Team Psychological Capital	4.583	0.917	0.902	0.953	0.803
Team Members' Psychological Capital	4.694	0.936	0.924	0.976	0.818
Team Support	4.694	0.936	0.924	0.976	0.818
Team Members' Work Performance	5.259	0.913	0.921	0.956	0.809

proven. The standardized estimated value of team members' psychological capital and team members' work performance is 0.506, and the critical ratio value is 10.735 greater than 2.58, indicating that the *p*-value is <0.01, greater than the *p*-value in the AMOS 23.0 analysis result, and the *p*-value required to meet the critical ratio value Therefore, team members' psychological capital has a significant impact on team members' work performance. Hypothesis 3 is proven.

The mediating role of team members' psychological capital

To verify the two intermediary variables assumed in this study, first, based on the direct effect of team psychological capital on team members' work performance, team members' psychological capital and team psychological capital are included in the model at the same time, and the mediating role of team members' psychological capital is examined. Construct a cross-level indirect interaction model.

The intermediary model of team members' psychological capital is as follows:

Model 1: Verification of the relationship between team psychological capital and team members' work performance

Level-1 Model: Team members' work performance = B0 + R

Level-2 Model: B0 = γ00 + γ01* (team psychological capital) + U0

Model 2: Verification of the relationship between team psychological capital and team members' psychological capital

Level-1 Model: Team members' psychological capital = B0 + R

Level-2 Model: B0 = γ00 + γ01* (team psychological capital) + U0

Model 3: Verifying the mediating effect of team members' psychological capital between team psychological capital and team members' work performance

Level-1 Model: Employee work performance = B0 + B1* (team members' psychological capital) + R

Level-2 Model: B0 = γ00 + γ01* (team psychological capital) + γ02* (team members' psychological capital) + U0

B1 = γ10

The running results of each model are shown in Table 2.

In the HLM 6.08 software, first, the overall level of interpretation of the variable team's psychological capital to verify the overall effect of the variable team members' work performance is carried out; that is, the equation of model one is executed, and the result of model one is obtained through the calculation of the HLM 6.08 software. The result is γ01c = 0.413, $p < 0.001$ (shown in Table 1), which shows that team psychological capital has a significant impact on team members' work performance. Hypothesis 1 is proven. The model is shown in Figure 1.

The intermediary model of team members' psychological capital as an intermediary variable belongs to 2-1-1. Based on the main effect, the influence of the overall-level variable team psychological capital on the individual-level intermediary variable team members' psychological capital is verified. Equation, calculated by HLM 6.08 software, provides the result of model two as γ01 = 0.363, $p < 0.001$ (shown in Table 1), which shows that team members' psychological capital is affected by team psychological capital, and the direction of influence is the same direction. Hypothesis 2 is proven. Finally, we consider both the overall-level explanation variable team psychological capital and the individual-level intermediary variable team members' psychological capital to test whether the direct effect of team psychological capital on team members' work performance disappears because of the existence of the intermediary variable team members' psychological capital, which in turn leads to the production of a complete intermediary effect. We incorporate team psychological capital and team members' psychological capital into model three at the same time, execute the equation of model three, and calculate with HLM 6.08 software to obtain γ01c,=0.32, $p > 0.05$; γ10b = 0.506, $p < 0.001$, where γ01c represents the effect of team psychological capital and team member's work performance, and γ10b represents the effect of team member's psychological capital and team member's work performance.

According to the model verification results, when the variables team psychological capital and team members' psychological capital are included in the model at the same time, team members' psychological capital and team members' work performance are significantly positively correlated, and the effect of team psychological capital and team members' work performance is significantly positive. The correlation (γ01c = 0.413, $p < 0.001$) became insignificant (γ01c, =0.32, $p > 0.05$). In summary, team members' psychological capital plays a completely intermediary role in team psychological capital and team members' work performance. Hypothesis 3 is proven. Model three is shown in Figure 2.

The mediating role of team support

For the second mediating variable, team support, based on the main effect, team support and team psychological capital are then included in the model to examine the mediating role of team support. According to the data from Krull and MacKinnon (2001)

TABLE 2 Model running results parameters.

Level			Parameter estimation			
Path			**Standardized estimate**	**SE**	**C.R.**	**Value of *p***
Same level	Team psychological capital → Team support		0.422	0.120	4.718	***
	Team members' psychological capital → Team members' work performance		0.506	0.063	10.735	***
Cross-Level	Dependent variable	Model	γ_{00}	γ_{01}	σ^2	τ_{00}
	Team members' performance	Zero model	5.226***		0.591	0.203***
		Team psychological capital → Team members' work performance	4.138***	0.413***	0.657	0.076***
		Team support →Team members' work performance	4.578***	0.372***	0.739	0.041***
	Team members' psychological capital	Zero model	5.433***		0.523	0.292***
		Team psychological capital → Team members' psychological capital	4.006***	0.363***	0.796	0.068***

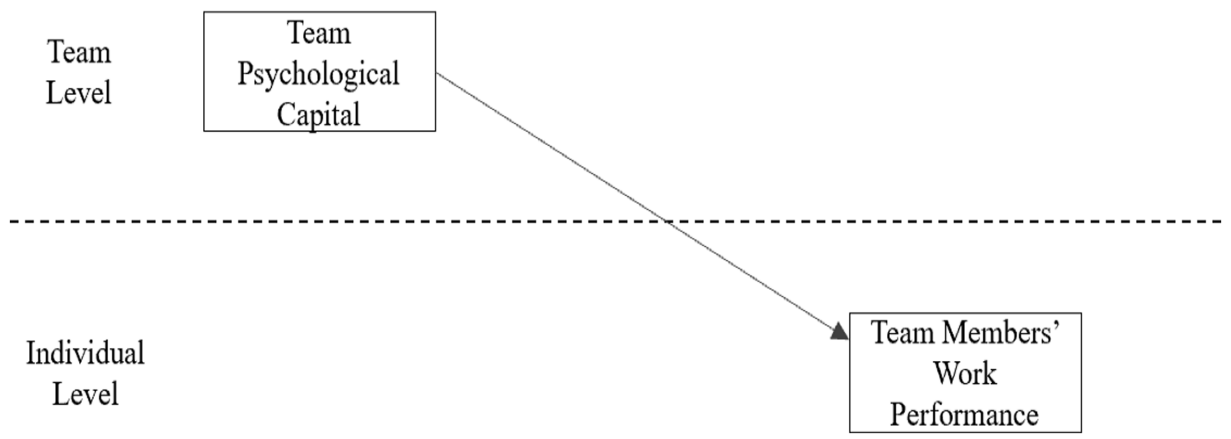

FIGURE 1
The main effect of team psychological capital and team members' work performance.

on the effect of multilevel mediation, the mediation variable team support selected for this study is a 2-2-1 model. The mediation model of team support is as follows:

Model 1: Verification of the relationship between team psychological capital and team members' work performance

Level-1 Model: Team members' work performance = B0 + R

Level-2 Model: B0 = γ00 + γ01* (team psychological capital) + U0

Model 4: Verification of the relationship between team psychological capital and team support

Level-2 Model: team support = γ00+ γ01* (team psychological capital) + U0

Model 5: Verification of the mediating effect of team support between team psychological capital and team performance

Level-1 Model: Team members' work performance = B0+ R

Level-2 Model: B0 = γ00 + γ01* (team psychological capital) + γ02* (team support) + U0

The mediation model of team support as a mediating variable belongs to 2-2-1. Based on the main effect, it then examines the influence of the overall level variable team psychological capital on the team level mediation variable team support feeling and implements the equation of model 4. After calculation by HLM 6.08 software, the result of model four is obtained. The result of model four is γ01 = 0.422, $p < 0.001$ (shown in Table 1), which shows that team support changes with the change in team psychological capital. The direction is the same, and Hypothesis 5 is further proven. Finally, to consider both the overall level of explanation variable team psychological capital and team-level intermediary variable team support, we also examine whether

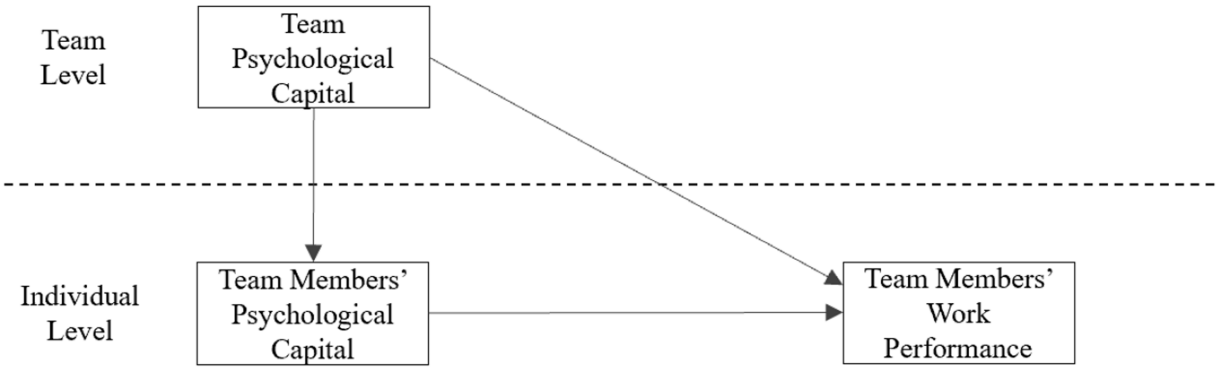

FIGURE 2
The mediating role of team members' psychological capital between team psychological capital and team members' work performance.

the direct effect of team psychological capital on team members' work performance disappears because of the existence of team support, which in turn leads to the production of a complete mediation effect. We incorporate team psychological capital and team support into model five at the same time, execute the equation of the model, and calculate by HLM 6.08 software, obtaining $\gamma 01c = 0.18$, $p > 0.05$ and $\gamma 10b = 0.372$, $p < 0.001$, where $\gamma 01c$ represents the effect of team psychological capital and team members' work performance; $\gamma 10b$ represents the effect of team support and team members' work performance. According to the model verification results, when the variables of team psychological capital and team support are included in the model, team members' psychological capital is significantly positively correlated with team members' work performance. Hypothesis 3 is proven, and team psychological capital is related to team members' work performance. The effect changed from a significant positive correlation ($\gamma 01c = 0.413$, $p < 0.001$) to a nonsignificant one ($\gamma 01c = 0.18$, $p > 0.05$). In summary, team support plays a completely intermediary role in the team's psychological capital and team members' work performance, and Hypothesis 7 is proven. Model five is shown in Figure 3.

Results and discussion

Positive effect of team psychological capital on team members' work performance

According to Table 1, team psychological capital has a significant positive impact on team members' work performance. Therefore, to improve individual work performance, we need to improve team psychological capital. The team's psychological capital can be effectively improved by establishing staff's physical and mental health files, setting up psychological education courses, setting up mental health specialists, etc. Team leaders themselves need to consciously and constantly implant, develop and train their own psychological capital; continuously improve their self-management ability; and then pass it on to their subordinates to set a benchmark.

The mediating role of team members' psychological capital

According to the model verification results, when the variables team psychological capital and team members' psychological capital are included in the model at the same time, team members' psychological capital and team members' work performance are significantly positively correlated, and the effect of team psychological capital and team members' work performance is significantly positive. In summary, team members' psychological capital plays a completely intermediary role in team psychological capital and team members' work performance, as shown in Figure 2.

To improve team members' psychological capital, enterprises need to take different measures based on the members' different educational backgrounds and specifically improve team members' psychological capital. In addition to the external conditions given by enterprises to enhance psychological capital, the root of promoting individual psychological capital lies in the members themselves. Members need to enhance their sense of self-efficacy, actively learn and update their knowledge structure and skills, take valuable actions toward their goals, and build their interest in their posts and careers.

The mediating role of team support

According to this article, based on the main effect, team support and team psychological capital are included in the model at the same time, and the mediating effect of team support on team psychological capital and team members' work performance is established.

To enhance team support of the human resource management team, starting from the three dimensions of team support is necessary, namely, organizational support, value

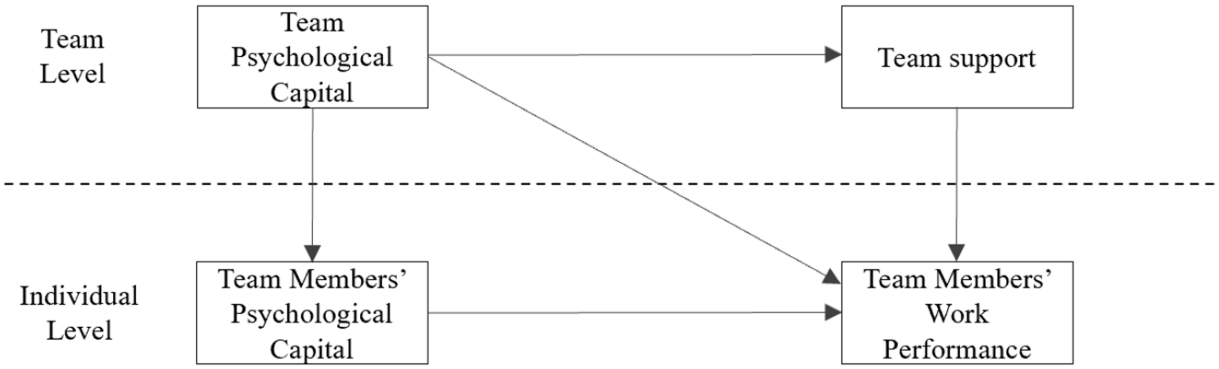

FIGURE 3
The mediating role of team support between team psychological capital and team members' work performance.

recognition and interest concern. The enterprise needs to clarify the system and specification, give attention to the working environment of human resources personnel, improve the distribution of benefits such as salary and welfare, improve its performance appraisal indicators, link the personal interests of team members with the interests of the team in the performance appraisal, encourage employees through incentives and other means, enhance team support, and then improve team members' work performance.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

YJ developed the research structure of the article, determined the research methodology and organized the survey and analysis. XZ designed the questionnaire, constructed the model and analyzed the data. SL summarized the research background and theory. ZW participated in the formulation of the research findings and countermeasures. YD distributed the questionnaire and collected the data. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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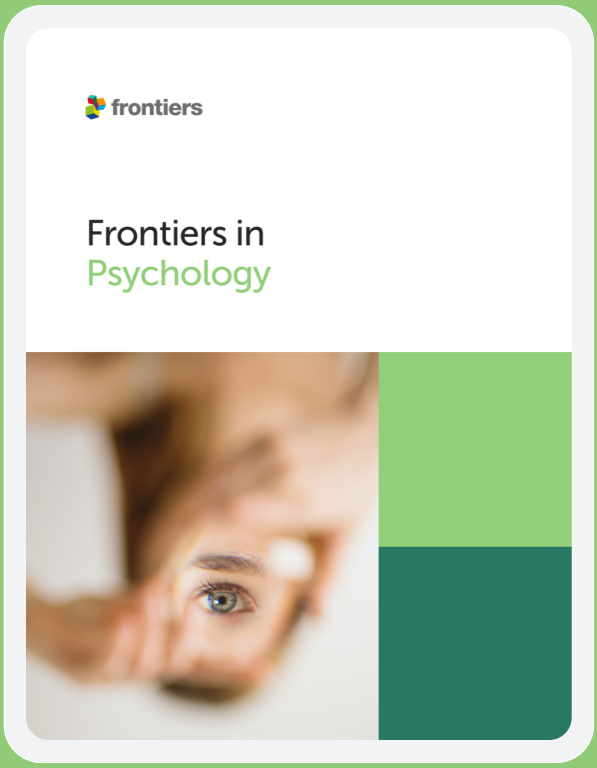

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