

Relationship Between Employer Branding Attributes and Employee Branding Dimensions in Colombian SMEs

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to determine the relationship between employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions in SMEs in Colombia. This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. Accordingly, a survey was administered to employees from SMEs across different sectors and regions of Colombia, obtaining a total of 1,160 valid responses. Descriptive analyses were performed using SPSS, followed by PLS-SEM to test the proposed theoretical model. The findings reveal that healthy work environment, training and development, and corporate ethics and responsibility significantly influence the key dimensions of employee branding: Perceived Transformational Leadership, Perceived Internal Communication, Perceived Organizational Support, and Perceived External Prestige. In conclusion, the efforts made by SMEs to build a value proposition based on key employer branding attributes have a significant impact on how employees perceive, internalize, and project the image of their organization.

Keywords

Employee Branding; Employer Branding; Human Resource Management; Internal Marketing; Small And Medium-Sized Enterprises.

Registration

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Relación entre los atributos de marca empleadora y las dimensiones de marca de empleado en las pymes colombianas

Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación es determinar la relación entre los atributos de la marca empleadora y las dimensiones de la marca de empleado en las pymes de Colombia. Este estudio empleó un diseño correlacional de corte transversal. En consecuencia, se aplicó una encuesta a empleados de pymes de diferentes sectores y regiones de Colombia, obteniendo un total de 1.160 respuestas válidas. Se realizaron análisis descriptivos con SPSS, seguidos de un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales mediante mínimos cuadrados parciales (PLS-SEM) para contrastar el modelo teórico propuesto. Los hallazgos revelan que el ambiente de trabajo saludable, la capacitación y el desarrollo, y la ética y la responsabilidad corporativa influyen significativamente en las dimensiones clave de la marca de empleado: Liderazgo Transformacional Percibido, Comunicación Interna Percibida, Apoyo Organizacional Percibido y Prestigio Externo Percibido. En conclusión, los esfuerzos realizados por las pymes para construir una propuesta de valor basada en atributos clave de marca empleadora tienen un impacto significativo en cómo los empleados perciben, internalizan y proyectan la imagen de su organización.

Palabras clave

Marca de empleado; marca de empresa; gestión de recursos humanos; marketing interno; Pequeñas y medianas empresas.

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1. Introduction

Due to the increasing competitiveness of today's labor market, Human Resources (HR) is perceived as capital capable of providing organizations with a competitive advantage ([Barney, 1991](#); [Pfeffer, 1994](#)). Consequently, effective management of this resource brings favorable results for a company, represented by increased efficiency and productivity and reduced turnover and absenteeism ([Fulmer et al., 2003](#); [Kashyap and Verma, 2018](#); [Rana et al., 2021](#)). This is feasible when organizations understand the value of HR and, therefore, carry out a set of actions aimed at improving not only the processes of attracting and recruiting the best talent but also the processes of training and development, remuneration and compensation, professional development and growth, and the creation of conducive working environments ([App et al., 2012](#)).

Based on the above, organizations have implemented strategies that apply marketing principles to human talent management (HTM). These strategies consist of designing an attractive value proposition, composed of tangible and intangible benefits (attributes), which are communicated to employees with the aim of strengthening the employees' image, as well as facilitating the processes of attracting and retaining talent. This process of building a positive image as an employer is known as employer branding ([Ambler and Barrow, 1996](#); [Lievens et al., 2007](#)).

Grounded in literature, it was found that authors mention another concept, which is also related to marketing and internal branding: 'employee branding'. The former concept has been defined as the process through which employees internalize the desired brand image and are willing to communicate this image of the organization to stakeholders ([Miles and Mangold, 2004](#)). However, to date, there are no studies that relate the two concepts or differentiate them conceptually. Consequently, this study seeks to fill this knowledge gap through conceptual precision and the identification of the characteristics of employer branding and employee branding as constructs to find the relationship between them in SMEs in Colombia.

Although most research on this topic has focused on large organizations, this study seeks to highlight the importance of SMEs, considering the challenges they face in attracting and retaining talent due to limited resources and informal structures. According to [Monteiro et al. \(2020\)](#), this is a novel topic in organizations of this size, which would benefit from implementing this strategy in the light of disruptive changes in labor market dynamics. Additionally, as the authors point out, it is pertinent to know the degree of implementation of this type of tool aimed at improving the image as an employer in organizations that have limitations in terms of resources and types of structures, since in large enterprises it is easy to identify the strategies they implement to improve their image as an employer.

It is also necessary to recognize the crucial role that SMEs perform in economic development. According to [Betov \(2020\)](#), these contribute to job creation and to the establishment of conditions that strengthen supply chains, especially in Latin America. In Colombia, SMEs are strategic actors that have experienced outstanding economic growth in recent years, leading to the transformation of the productive apparatus and increased competitiveness in the country.

The objective of this study is to determine the relationship between employer-branding attributes and employee-branding dimensions in SMEs in Colombia. It is important to conduct this study in Colombian enterprises, as only one research article on employer branding applied in the country was found in the literature ([López-Rodríguez and Neme-Chaves, 2020](#)), and no studies have examined the concept of employee branding. This highlights a knowledge gap that the present study seeks to fill, thereby contributing to both the academic field and talent management practice within Colombian SMEs.

The following sections of this article are structured as follows: sections defining the fundamental concepts of this research, attributes of employer branding, and dimensions of employee branding, describing related and relevant work on the subject; a section on the proposed theoretical model; a section on materials

and methods detailing the research design, population characterization, sample design, and measuring instrument; and finally, the results and discussion revealing how the final model was evaluated and its implications. Finally, the conclusions of the research are presented.

2. Theoretical framework

Attributes of Employer Branding

The concept of employer branding has been understood as a strategic tool used by organizations to retain and attract talent ([Leekha Chhabra and Sharma, 2014](#)). This tool, as mentioned by [Wallace, Lings, Cameron, Sheldon \(2014\)](#), brings together the principles of marketing and recruitment practices, as well as being based on the idea that employees are just as relevant as consumers when analyzing brand image. In this sense, just as potential customers develop preferences for one product over another, potential employees evaluate the attributes of an organization, generating preferences for one employer over another. [Table 1](#) presents employer branding attributes.

Table 1.

Employer Branding Attributes

Author(s)	Attribute	Definition
Tanwar and Prasad (2017)	Training and Development	Development opportunities provided by an organization in terms of Training and Development, as well as working in an empowering environment. Specifically, this attribute seeks to reflect the skills development and growth opportunities that the company provides to its employees.
	Ethics and Corporate Responsibility	This attribute refers to variables related to the ethical and social concerns that a company has towards its employees and society in general.
	Work-Life Balance	Work-Life Balance is a state of mind that allows a person to effectively manage responsibilities at work and at home, achieving satisfaction in both areas of their lives. When employees achieve this balance, they improve their well-being through reduced stress. This attribute seeks to measure whether a company is concerned with ensuring a balance between its employees' personal and professional lives through various strategies that also seek to improve the company's image as an employer.
	Healthy Work Atmosphere	This attribute seeks to measure the type of environment in which a worker operates, in terms of whether it is friendly, stress-free and where a teamwork mentality prevails among employees.
	Compensation and Benefits	System of material or monetary remuneration offered by a company to its employees, which impacts their well-being and status. This attribute is measured through items such as the perception of a high salary, a system of rewards and bonuses, and stable job security.

Note: Author's own work.

The classification by [Tanwar and Prasad \(2017\)](#) was employed to measure the efforts made by an organization to attract and retain employees. This classification has a scale previously developed and validated by the authors to measure each of the proposed attributes.

Dimensions of employee branding

The concept of employee branding was first introduced by authors [Miles and Mangold \(2004\)](#), who defined it as the process of internalizing the desired brand image by employees, thanks to activities involving internal branding and the willingness of employees to project that image to customers and other stakeholders. This definition will be used in this research on a conceptual basis, as it constitutes one of the most recognized

seminal contributions to employee branding. As indicated by [Dhiman and Arora \(2020\)](#), employee branding is a multidimensional construct that has been studied by various authors. [Table 2](#) summarizes employee branding dimensions.

Table 2.

Employee Branding Dimensions

Author(s)	Dimension	Definition
Dhiman and Arora (2020)	Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	This refers to perceived HRM practices that produce positive attitudes and behaviors towards the company's brand among employees.
	Perceived Internal Brand Communication	When employees perceive brand-oriented internal communication systems, their knowledge of the brand improves, which affects their understanding of the desired brand image.
	Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	This refers to the decisive role that leadership style plays in aligning employees' personal values with those of the brand. Transformational Leadership is defined as a leader's approach to motivating subordinates to act in the best interests of the brand.
	Perceived Brand Organizational Support	This refers to the belief held by employees that their employer cares about their wellbeing and recognizes the contribution they make to the organization.
	Perceived External Brand Prestige	It is the employees' belief regarding the image that external stakeholders have of their employer.

Note: Author's own work.

The model proposed by [Dhiman and Arora \(2020\)](#) was used for this research. Through its dimensions to find the degree of internalization of the brand image using different variables: Brand-Focused Human Resource Management (HRM) Practices, Perceived Internal Brand Communication, Transformational Leadership, Brand Support, and Perceived External Brand Prestige. In addition to its conceptual soundness, this model is particularly useful for empirical purposes, as the authors provide a comprehensive measurement tool in their original study, with specific items associated with each dimension, which facilitated its adaptation and application in this research.

Theoretical relationship between employer branding and employee branding

Based on the employer branding attributes and the employee branding dimensions selected for this study and presented in the previous sections, the theoretical model designed is set out below; this model enables an analysis of how these two sets of constructs relate to one another. This relationship is based on the idea that employer branding not only influences the attraction of talent, but also the internalization and promotion of a company's brand by its employees (employee branding). However, in accordance with Social Exchange Theory ([Blau, 1964](#)) and Social Identity Theory ([Tajfel and Turner, 1985](#)), employer branding practices can be regarded as organizational stimuli or signals that employees interpret and to which they respond through behaviors and attitudes aligned with the brand. In this sense, the attributes of employer branding serve as precursors to the dimensions of employee branding, as they influence both employees' perception of the organization and their internalization of the brand image that the organization projects.

This relationship between the two constructs can be explained by a sequence of psychological and communicational mechanisms that mediate between the organization's efforts or actions and employees' responses to these stimuli. Firstly, employer branding practices such as financial remuneration, the working environment and development opportunities become signals sent by the organization to employees, who perceive and evaluate them in terms of their consistency with the brand's values and promises ([Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004](#)). Subsequently, if these perceptions are positive and consistent with the employees' own beliefs, they will be internalized by the employees and integrated into their self-concept, which will determine their organizational identification, in accordance with Social Identity Theory ([Tajfel and Turner, 1985](#)). Finally, this identification with the employer is expressed through behaviors and attitudes aligned with the brand, such as loyalty, commitment and the projection of a consistent brand image to third parties ([Miles](#)

[and Mangold, 2004](#); [King and Grace, 2008](#)). Based on the reasoning set out above, a series of hypotheses is proposed to explain the expected relationships between the attributes of employer branding and the dimensions of employee branding, taking the latter as a starting point and grounding each relationship in the theoretical framework.

Proposed theoretical model

Based on the attributes of employer branding and the dimensions of employee branding chosen for this study, the theoretical model designed is presented below, which allows us to analyze how both sets of constructs are related. This relationship is based on the idea that employer branding not only influences the attraction of talent, but also the internalization and projection of a company's brand by its employees (employee branding). In this regard, a series of hypotheses are proposed that explain the expected relationships between employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions, using the latter as an anchor point, and basing each link on the literature.

HRM focused on perceived brand

HRM Focused on Perceived Brand refers to those actions taken by the organization that influence employees to display good behaviour and attitudes towards the brand ([Chang, Chiang, Han, 2012](#)). Similarly, these practices ensure brand identity through employee recruitment, selection, and promotion processes. Practices included in this group are those related to selection processes, Training and Development processes that enable the proper delivery of the value proposition, compensation and remuneration systems, and opportunities for development and growth ([Dhiman and Arora, 2020](#)).

According to [Darlington \(2005\)](#), activities related to compensation and other benefits and incentives are linked to high employee performance. In fact, according to expectancy theories, employees are likely to perform well when they perceive that their work effort translates into a reward or benefit ([Vroom, 1964](#)). Consequently, remuneration has motivational value and requires the organization to design an effective and fair remuneration system ([Al-Shuaibi, Shamsudin, Aziz, 2016](#)). In accordance with the above, the following hypothesis is proposed, which relates the attribute of Compensation and Benefits to the dimension of HRM Focused on Perceived Brand.

H1a: Compensation and Benefits (an attribute of employer branding) influence HRM Focused on Perceived Brand (a dimension of employee branding).

People-centred practices are based on the view of employees as an important asset for the organization, as they represent the sum of knowledge, skills, and abilities that they bring to the workplace ([Cardy, Miller, Ellis, 2007](#)). From this perspective, employees become human capital and therefore the central focus of HRM. Thus, the focus of analysis shifts from jobs to employees themselves as a source of performance and value for the brand. In this context, investing in Training and Development programmes allows organizations to demonstrate their commitment to the professional and personal growth of human talent ([Ichniowski, Shaw, Prennush, 1997](#)).

Such programmes reinforce employees' perception that the company values continuous improvement, invests in its employees, and fosters the development of a favorable working environment ([Ichniowski et al., 1997](#)). This increases work commitment by fostering confidence in one's own ability to meet objectives and achieve positive results ([Albrecht et al., 2015](#)). Consequently, they have a direct impact on how employees value the company's investment in their development and on the overall effectiveness of HRM ([Bakker et al., 2011](#)). Thus, based on the above, the following hypothesis is proposed, which relates the attribute of Training and Development to the dimension of Perceived Brand-Centred HRM.

H1b: Training and Development (an attribute of employer branding) influences HRM Focused on Perceived Brand (a dimension of employee branding).

HRM practices also include efforts made by employers to ensure a balance between personal and professional life and offer flexible working styles, which shows that an organization cares about the well-being of its employees. In this regard, workplace flexibility policies, such as the ability to choose when, where, and for how long work tasks are performed, demonstrate that the organization is willing to give employees autonomy over their work schedules ([Saks, 2022](#)).

When organizations implement HRM practices focused on ensuring the well-being of their employees through Work-Life Balance programmes (e.g., on-site childcare, parental leave, etc.), they influence employees' perceptions of how their employer values their contributions, cares about their basic needs, their growth and their health ([McAllister and Bigley, 2002](#)). Therefore, based on the above, regarding the possible relationship between the attribute of Work-Life Balance and the dimension of HRM Focused on Perceived Brand, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1c: Work-Life Balance (an attribute of employer branding) influences HRM Focused on Perceived Brand (a dimension of employee branding).

Internal communication of perceived brand

Continuing with internal communication of perceived brand, which was also proposed by [Sujchaphong et al. \(2020\)](#) as an influential dimension of employee branding, this is defined by authors as the dissemination of brand knowledge and information generation efforts. In this sense, through this dimension, it is possible to communicate brand values to employees to facilitate their understanding, acceptance, and internalization ([King, 2010](#); [King et al., 2012](#)). Under this framework, internal communication influences the degree to which employees identify with a brand, as well as their willingness to support it ([Edwards, 2009](#)).

Internal brand communication is necessary to clarify employees' roles, foster brand commitment and brand loyalty, and encourage brand citizenship behaviour. With regard to role clarity, this is defined as the degree to which employees understand the tasks they are required to perform within the organization ([Garas, Mahran, Mohamed 2018](#)). As for brand commitment, this refers to the degree of psychological attachment employees have to the brand, based on brand compliance, to the extent that they adjust their opinions and perspectives in accordance with the brand's requirements; identification with the brand, which consists of the extent to which the employee feels part of the company; and finally, internalization, seen as the extent to which an employee has incorporated the brand into their thoughts and behaviour ([Burmman, Zeplin, Riley, 2009](#)). As for brand loyalty, this is viewed as the employee's future intention to remain with the organization ([King et al., 2012](#)).

Brand citizenship behaviour refers to the aggregate of employee behaviors that reinforce brand identity. Consequently, this construct represents each employee's intention to engage in certain behaviors—beyond their formally defined role expectations—which reinforce brand identity; one such behaviour is the 'employee voice', which is defined as a form of brand citizenship through which employees proactively communicate suggestions, ideas and opinions with a view to improving the organization ([King and Grace, 2009](#); [Burmman et al., 2009](#); [Xiong, Fung So, Wu, King, 2019](#)).

Perceived Internal Brand Communication is evaluated based on variables such as clear communication of the brand promise to employees; internal and external communication by the organization regarding the importance of the role of employees in delivering that promise; internal communication to employees about the parameters within which employees must perform their duties; and finally, the quality of communication between managers and employees regarding work issues and feedback on employee performance ([Dhiman and Arora, 2020](#)). Pursuant to the above, about internal communication, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Healthy Working Environment (an attribute of employer branding) influences Perceived Internal Brand Communication (a dimension of employee branding).

Perceived transformational leadership oriented towards the brand

This dimension refers to employees' perception of their leaders' ability to motivate, guide and align their values and behaviors with those of the organizational brand. Thus, according to Transformational Leadership Theory ([Burns, 1978](#)), this type of leadership refers to the process by which the leader engages their followers and creates connections with them, thereby raising motivation and morale levels for both followers and leaders.

From the perspective of internal branding, transformational leaders play a crucial role in conveying the brand's values to employees, helping them to internalize these values, commit to the brand and promote it both within and outside the organization ([Judson, 2006](#)). However, the influence of this type of leader is not limited to motivation; it also extends to facilitating brand-centred training and communication processes, thereby making them key players in employee branding ([Sujchaphong et al., 2020](#)). This dimension is measured on the basis of factors such as the leader's ability to communicate the organization's objectives clearly and positively, to support employees and motivate them to perform outstandingly, to recognize employees' efforts, to foster trust, cooperation and teamwork, to demonstrate an open and tolerant attitude, and to promote respect for others ([Dhiman and Arora, 2020](#)).

Recent literature suggests that the perception of Transformational Leadership may be conditioned by the work context. According to [Zhang et al. \(2025\)](#), a Healthy Work Environment characterized by a positive organizational climate can influence perceptions of leadership. Along the same lines, [Ansari and Khan \(2024\)](#) found that positive work environments, particularly those that are supportive, enhance employees' perceptions of Transformational Leadership. In this regard, it can be said that a Healthy Work Environment, characterized by positive interpersonal relationships, emotional support, teamwork and low stress, creates favorable working conditions for the actions of the transformational leader to be more visible and effective. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Healthy Work Environment (an attribute of employer branding) influences Perceived Brand-Oriented Transformational Leadership (a dimension of employee branding).

Perceived brand support

The perception of support provided by an organization is developed from Organizational Support Theory (OST), which arises from a social exchange approach that describes the connections between employees and the organization for which they work ([Garg and Dhar, 2014](#)). The perception of organizational support refers to individuals' beliefs about the degree to which an organization values their contributions and cares about them ([Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, Sowa, 1986](#)). Based on the above, [Chiang, Han, Chuang \(2011\)](#) indicate that employees will perform better when they perceive a high degree of support from their employer, as they will develop a greater level of responsibility towards the employer and help in the achievement of its objectives ([Dhar, 2012](#)).

At what time the organization is concerned with strengthening the relationship between supervisor and subordinate and ensuring that employees can freely express their ideas and needs, the latter will perceive strong support from their employer, which translates into better performance, less intention to leave their job, and a focus on achieving the company's objectives ([Burlison et al., 2021](#)). In summary, when employees strive to ensure a Healthy Work Environment, especially through visible and empathetic support from supervisors and the promotion of interpersonal relationships based on respect and solidarity, they are crucial in making employees feel that the organization values them and cares about their well-being, which implies greater perceived organizational support. In line with the above, the following hypothesis is proposed ([Asif et al., 2023](#)).

H4a: Healthy Working Environment (attribute of employer branding) influences Perceived Brand Support (dimension of employee branding).

[Rozikan et al. \(2024\)](#) mention how training programmes, skills development and support policies can influence perceived organizational support. The authors emphasize that when an organization invests in the development of its employees and offers them guidance, they will feel supported and have greater confidence in their abilities, which will have an impact on their work performance. In this sense, developing such programmes can improve employees' perceptions of how their employer cares about their growth and success. Similarly, [Ergun, Tunca, Cetinkaya, Balcioğlu \(2025\)](#) add that specific interventions, such as comprehensive training programmes, mentoring initiatives and psychological support mechanisms, can improve employee engagement and empowerment.

Finally, as [Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel \(2009\)](#) mention, providing access to Training and Development is a way for the organization to communicate to its employees the value it places on their contributions. In fact, employees feel that the organization is giving them the opportunity to update their existing skills and knowledge by investing in Training and Development programmes. The above is supported by Social Exchange Theory (SET), which states that human resource practices that reflect investment in and support for employees indicate that the organization seeks to continue a social exchange relationship with them. Thus, when employees perceive support from their employer, they are more likely to commit to the organization, feeling a duty to reciprocate its efforts through better performance and a lower intention to leave. In accordance with the aforementioned, a relationship between the attribute of Training and Development, and the dimension of Perceived Brand Support is proposed through the following hypothesis. H4b: Training and Development (an attribute of employer branding) influences Perceived Brand Support (a dimension of employee branding).

Perceived external prestige of the brand

As established by [Tuna et al. \(2016\)](#), a company's reputation affects the perceptions of customers, investors, employees, and the public. [Fombrun \(1996\)](#) establishes certain traits that determine an organization's reputation: trust, credibility, pride, quality, service, and consumer orientation. Thus, when an organization has a strong image and reputation, it attracts the best employees, who are drawn to the organization's image. As [Carmeli and Freund \(2002\)](#) point out, there is an important conceptual difference between external organizational prestige and perceived external organizational prestige.

[Kim, Lee, Lee, Kim \(2010\)](#) emphasizes how a company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices can affect its external reputation by influencing third parties' perception of the organization. Similarly, [De Roeck, El Akremi, Swaen \(2016\)](#) also mention that CSR activities provide identity signals that enhance the attractiveness and distinctiveness of the organization, allowing employees to believe that their organization is recognized by external agents due to good practices and socially responsible actions. Consistent with the above, a relationship is established between the attribute of Ethics and CSR, and the dimension of Perceived External Prestige.

H5a: Ethics and CSR (an attribute of employer branding) influence Perceived External Prestige of the Brand (a dimension of employee branding).

An organization's prestige and image in the market is also affected by internal practices such as offering compensation packages and other benefits such as fair wages, health plans (medical, dental and vision insurance), as these represent an incentive to effectively retain employees and encourage them to speak positively about their employer, thereby generating prestige for the company externally ([Srinivas, Prasad, Rani, Nisa, 2025](#)). In fact, enterprises have now adopted the strategy of offering even more attractive benefit packages that seek to differentiate themselves from those offered by other employers. These benefits could include well-paid time off, paid maternity leave, and health management resources. In this way,

enterprises seek to strengthen the retention of their internal talent, but also to attract potential candidates, who interpret these benefits as synonymous with an organization that cares about the well-being of its employees (Pytlovany, 2019).

This shows that Compensation and Benefits packages not only serve an internal function but also have a positive influence on organizational attractiveness. These practices, which promote employee well-being, become differentiating factors that influence the Perceived External Prestige of the Brand. As per the aforementioned, the following hypothesis is formulated, which relates the attribute Compensation and Benefits to the dimension of Perceived External Prestige of the Brand. Figure 1 presents the sagittal diagram that shows the relationships that could exist between the attributes of employer branding and the dimensions of employee branding, based on the previously analyzed and referenced literature, which allowed for the construction of the nine hypotheses mentioned above.

H5b: Compensation and Benefits (an attribute of employer branding) influence the Perceived External Prestige of the Brand (a dimension of employee branding).

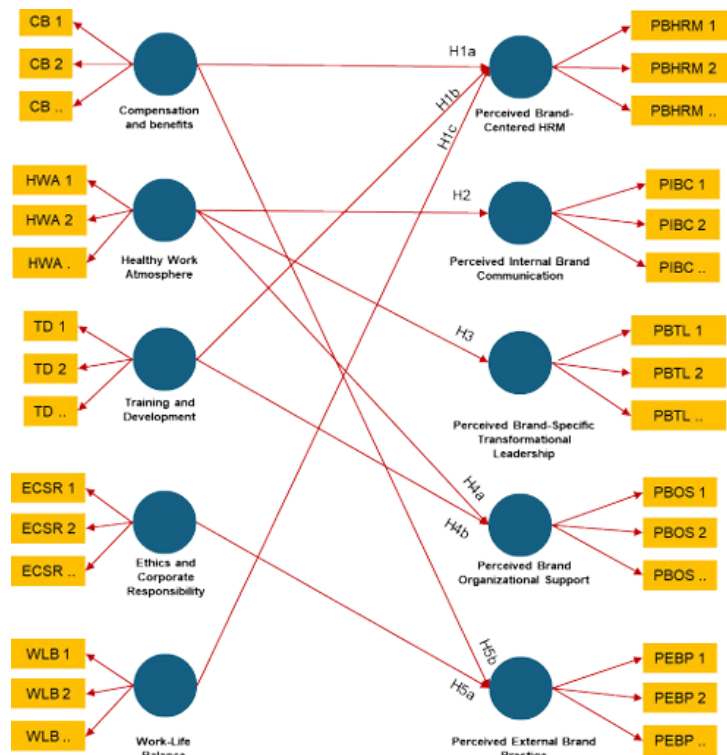


Figura 1. Employee Branding Dimensions

Note: Author's own work.

Finally, despite growing academic interest in employer branding and employee branding constructs, there are still gaps in the literature regarding empirically validated measurement models that integrate both constructs in the context of SMEs. In fact, some of the studies reviewed, although they address employer branding in SMEs, do so from qualitative approaches (e.g., Szegedi et al., 2023); these, although they provide a rich and contextual understanding, do not provide metric structures or quantitative scales that allow for the statistical validity of the relationship between constructs to be evaluated, as required in this study. Consequently, and due to the exploratory nature of these studies, it is not possible to evaluate hypotheses or generalize findings to a wider population.

3. Methodology

Research design

This study is developed from the post-positivist paradigm, under which reality can be understood, but incompletely and through probabilistic methods. Post-positivism considers the social and cultural context in which phenomena develop. [Creswell \(2014\)](#) indicates that post-positivism uses a deterministic philosophy in which causes produce effects or results; consequently, it is necessary to identify and evaluate these causes. Like positivism, post-positivism uses quantitative methods to study variables; this approach is relevant to this study, which is to analyse the relationship between two constructs (employer branding and employee branding) by measuring their attributes and dimensions. In this sense, the scope of the research will be correlational, bearing in mind that the aim is not to describe or explore a phenomenon, but to examine whether there is an association between two variables in each context.

The research uses a deductive approach, drawing on pre-existing theories in academic literature to test them empirically in a particular context. Specifically, the models proposed by [Tanwar and Prasad \(2017\)](#), and [Dhiman and Arora \(2020\)](#) are used to address the concepts of employer branding and employee branding, respectively, from which explicit hypotheses are formulated about the relationships between the constructs of these models. These hypotheses will be statistically evaluated to determine whether employer branding attributes influence employee branding dimensions in the context of the Colombian SMEs analyzed in this study.

Characterization of the population

SMEs have been recognized globally for their role in strengthening economies, especially for their contribution to GDP, job creation, and increased competitiveness in Latin American countries ([Rojas-Berrio et al., 2022](#)). [Table 3](#) presents the characterization of SMEs by sector in Colombia.

Table 3.

Classification of SMEs by Sector and Total Assets in UVT

Sector	Firm type	Total assets
Manufacturer	SB	Higher than 23,563 UVT and lower than or equal to 204,995 UVT
	MSE	Higher than 204,995 UVT and lower than or equal to 1,736,565 UVT
Services	SB	Higher than 32,988 UVT and lower than or equal to 131,951 UVT
	MSE	Higher than 131,951 UVT and lower than or equal to 483,034 UVT
Trade	SB	Higher than 44,769 UVT and lower than or equal to 431,196 UVT
	MSE	Higher than 431,196 UVT and lower than or equal to 2,160,692 UVT

Note: [Ministerio de Industria y Comercio \(2019\)](#).

For the purposes of this research, no department, city, or region was chosen for data collection. In this regard, the participating enterprises are in different cities across the country, without this implying the use of geographical location as a study variable in this research, as the data was analyzed.

Sample design

The sampling used in this research was non-probabilistic, which means that participants were not selected using a random procedure. In this type of sampling, not all elements of the population have the same probability of being selected ([Vehovar et al., 2016](#)). Among the existing modalities for this approach, convenience sampling was chosen, given the economic and time constraints associated with the development of the study. However, an effort was made to collect a sample that was as diverse and representative as possible, so that the results obtained would retain an adequate level of validity and reliability.

To this end, a database provided by the Bogotá Cámara de Comercio (2023 - 2024) was used, which contained contact information for SMEs located in different regions of Colombia. Based on this database, a preliminary filter was applied to include only enterprises classified as SMEs, considering the purposes of this research. Subsequently, 8,880 emails were sent to the registered contacts, inviting representatives of these enterprises to voluntarily participate in the study.

Although probabilistic sampling was not used, the aim was to achieve a diverse sample in terms of participating enterprises. The sample size was estimated based on the total number of employees who were contacted via mass email, using as the population the total number of workers employed by the enterprises that ultimately participated in the study, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5% as a guide for assessing the adequacy of the data collected. Additionally, an expected proportion value of 0.5 was used, considering that non-probabilistic samples are being used and there is no previous data available to obtain this information ([Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014](#)). Thus, using the formula for calculating sample size in simple random sampling for finite populations, the following result was obtained:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p) \cdot N}{(N - 1) \cdot e^2 + Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p)} \quad (1)$$

Where:

N = Population size = 2,112

Z = Confidence level = 95%

p = Expected proportion = 0.5

e = Margin of error = 0.05

$$= \frac{1.96^2 \cdot 0.5 \cdot (1 - 0.5) \cdot 2,112}{(2,112 - 1) \cdot 0.05^2 + 1.96^2 \cdot 0.5 \cdot (1 - 0.5)} \quad (2)$$

Based on the above calculation, a reference value of 325 participants was obtained. In this context, obtaining 1,160 effective responses represents a significant achievement, as it exceeds the recommended minimum by more than three times and lends reliability and robustness to the research model. Although the sampling was non-probabilistic for convenience, the fact that a large volume of data was obtained contributes to the potential representativeness of employee perceptions, which in turn reduces bias due to insufficient sample size and reinforces the validity of the results obtained.

Measuring instrument

To achieve the objective set out in this research and thus measure the attributes of employer branding and the dimensions of employee branding in SMEs in Colombia, a survey was administered based on a set of statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The process of constructing and applying the survey is presented below.

- Conceptual definition of variables: This stage corresponds to the conceptual precision of the main variables of the study: employer branding and employee branding.
- Operationalization of variables: At this stage, the objective was to convert abstract concepts (employer branding and employee branding) into observable variables to facilitate their measurement. Employer branding will be evaluated based on the following attributes, proposed by [Tanwar and Prasad \(2017\)](#): Healthy Work Environment, Training and Development, Work-Life Balance, Ethics and Social Responsibility, and Remuneration and Benefits. Otherwise, to measure employee branding, the following five dimensions proposed by [Dhiman and Arora \(2020\)](#) were used: Transformational Leadership, HRM Focused on Perceived Brand, Internal Communication of Perceived Brand, Perceived Support from the Company, and Perceived External Prestige.

- Selection of measurement scales: To measure the attributes or dimensions of employer branding, we used the scale proposed by [Tanwar and Prasad \(2017\)](#), which consists of twenty-five items grouped into the five attributes mentioned. The scale used to measure employee branding was developed and validated by [Dhiman and Arora \(2020\)](#) based on a sample of 421 frontline employees in luxury hotels in northern India.
- Expert evaluation: Given that the selected scales had been previously validated theoretically by the authors, and no modifications were made to them in terms of adding or removing any items. The expert validation was conducted in April 2024, with the participation of three experts in the field, who reviewed the entire instrument.
- Survey adjustment: Following review of the instrument by the experts, the survey was adjusted considering all recommendations and observations. The final survey thus has the characteristics presented in [Table 4](#).
- Application of the survey: After a series of final revisions and adjustments by the student and research director, the link to the Google Forms survey was shared with the contact previously established in each of the participating enterprises.

Table 4.

General Characteristics of the Survey

Characteristic	Description
Total number of items	Sixty-four distributed as follows: (1) Demographic items, seven; (2) Items to measure employer branding, twenty-three; (3) Items to measure employee branding, thirty-four.
Dimensions assessed	Employer branding (5 attributes) Employee branding (5 dimensions)
Response format	5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree)
Route of administration	Online survey via the Google Forms platform, shared in internal WhatsApp groups or via each company's corporate email.
Estimated application time	10–15 minutes
Language of the survey	Spanish
Target population	Employees of Colombian SMEs
Type of application	Individual
Date of application	15 August 2024 – 30 October 2024
Confidentiality and consent	The responses collected were completely anonymous; therefore, no personal identification data, such as name or document number, was requested. Likewise, before starting the survey, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the ethical principles that guide it. This information was presented in an informed consent section, which had to be read and accepted by each participant as a condition for continuing with the survey.

Note: Author's own work.

4. Results

The analysis of the collected data was conducted in two complementary stages, aimed at answering the research question. In the first stage, a sociodemographic analysis of the sample was performed, describing the distribution of participants according to gender, age, educational level, and length of service in the company. The second stage involved quantitative analysis, which was divided into two phases. Initially, descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS software to examine the general characteristics of the data. Subsequently, the proposed theoretical model was validated using SEM techniques, through SmartPLS 4 software.

For the development of sociodemographic analysis and the application of PLS-SEM algorithm, the responses of employees belonging to enterprises with ten or more workers were considered. This decision responds to this research, which seeks to identify general patterns in the context of SMEs in Colombia, rather than

making interpretations based on individual or unrepresentative cases. Responses from enterprises that did not meet this minimum participation threshold were excluded, as their low representativeness could introduce biases in both the sociodemographic characterization and the structural model. Consequently, ninety of the 1,251 responses initially collected were discarded, resulting in a total of 1,160 valid responses that were used for the analyses.

Finally, one of the main contributions to this research was the preparation of thirty-three individual reports addressed to each of the participating enterprises, as part of the commitment made at the time of the call for participation. Once the data collection process was complete, each company was sent a personalized executive report, which included the results of the measurement of employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions. This report also contained key definitions to facilitate understanding of the variables analyzed, as well as a section with the main findings and management recommendations based on the results and analysis obtained.

Sociodemographic analysis

Based on the data collected, and considering the 1,160 valid responses, a sociodemographic analysis of the participating sample was carried out, with the aim of providing information on the percentage of participation by gender, age, level of education, and length of service in the company of the people who participated in the study. This characterization is key to interpreting the results of the model and guiding future research in the field of employer branding and employee branding in the Colombian context. Additionally, in terms of sectoral distribution, participating enterprises are grouped into 12 economic sectors, five of which accounted for the highest percentage of participation: Human Health Activities (26.5%), Artistic, Entertainment and Recreational Activities (15.9%), Information and Telecommunications (13.4%), Manufacturing Industries (9.9%) and Wholesale Trade and Repair of Motor Vehicles (9.2%). Continuing with [Table 5](#), it can be seen that, with regard to the gender of participants, the overall distribution was balanced in Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSEs), with 48.0% men and 51.7% women, while in small enterprises, women accounted for the majority (58.3%) compared to 41.7% men. It is worth mentioning that there was a higher proportion of people who identified with another gender in Small Businesses (SBs) (20.1%), compared to 0.3% reported in MSEs.

Table 5.
Sociodemographic Analysis of Study Participants

Sociodemographic variable	Category	MSEs (%)	SBs (%)
Gender	Male	48.0%	41.7%
	Female	51.7%	58.3%
	Other	0.3%	20.1%
Age	18–24 years	15.7%	18.0%
	25–34 years	38.1%	36.0%
	35–44 years	28.0%	30.2%
	45–54 years	13.2%	11.5%
	55–64 years	4.4%	3.6%
	65–70 years	0.6%	0.7%
Educational level	Full primary education	2.3%	1.4%
	Full secondary education	18.9%	29.5%
	Technician/Technologist	43.3%	31.7%
	Undergraduate	23.6%	23.7%
	Postgraduate	11.9%	13.7%

Continued on the next page

Sociodemographic variable	Category	MSEs (%)	SBs (%)
Length of service in the company	Less than 1 year	28.6%	30.9%
	Between 1 and 3 years	35.1%	33.8%
	Between 3 and 5 years	10.2%	6.5%
	More than 5 years	26.2%	28.8%
Position type	Operational	50.4%	44.6%
	Administrative	38.6%	35.3%
	Other	0.3%	20.1%

Note: Author's own work.

In terms of age, the 25-34 age group was the most representative in both MSEs (38.1%) and SBs (36.0%), followed by the 35-44 age group, indicating that the participants are mostly young adults. Additionally, the participation of people over fifty-five was minimal (less than 5% in both types of enterprises), reflecting a workforce concentrated in productive ages. In terms of educational level, it is noteworthy that most participants have technical and technological training, particularly in MSEs (43.3%), followed by those with undergraduate degrees (23.6%) and complete secondary education (18.9%). However, these three educational levels also predominate in small enterprises, with those with technical or technological training (31.7%) and complete secondary education (23.7%) representing the highest proportion. About length of service, in MSEs, most participants have been with the company for less than three years: 28.6% for less than one year and 35.1% between one and three years. In SBs, these are 30.9% and 33.8%, respectively. Finally, analyzing the distribution by type of position, operational roles predominate in both MSEs and SBs, with a share of 50.4% and 44.6% respectively, followed by administrative positions, which also had a significant presence (38.6% in MSEs and 35.3% in SBs).

Descriptive statistics of the model variables

Below is a summary of key descriptive statistics from the data collected, with the aim of understanding the behaviour of the responses collected in terms of their central tendency and dispersion. This allows us to identify biases in the distribution, as well as outliers or deviations from normality. Using SPSS software, a descriptive analysis was performed on the items that make up the employer brand and employee brand dimensions applied to employees of Colombian SMEs (N=1,160). Appendix G presents the mean, standard deviation, asymmetry, and kurtosis for each item. The results show averages ranging from 1.74 (WLB3) to 4.68 (CB3), with a higher concentration towards high values, indicating favorable perceptions. The standard deviation remained within a moderate range (between 0.79 and 1.42), indicating a reasonable dispersion in the responses. Otherwise, in terms of asymmetry, most items have negative values, indicating a slight concentration towards the right (high values on the scale).

Although some items such as CB3 (-3.09) and ECSR2 (-1.78) indicate high asymmetry, this behaviour does not affect the subsequent analysis, as the chosen modelling approach, PLS-SEM, does not require strict multivariate normality (Hair et al., 2017). Similarly, the kurtosis values for most items are within an acceptable range. Only have high values (CB3 = 10.009; ECSR2 = 3.521), which indicates a higher concentration of responses around the mean, but does not pose a significant threat to the analysis performed in SmartPLS 4, which will be presented later. In summary, the data presents characteristics suitable for proceeding with the analysis of structural equations by partial least squares.

Internal reliability analysis of scales

The internal reliability of each of the constructs that make up the instrument was assessed using SPSS, and the internal reliability results by attribute or dimension are presented in [Table A1](#) (see Appendices). Dimensions showed lower values, suggesting opportunities for improvement in future applications, either

through adjustments to the wording of the items or through additional analysis. However, in general, the scales used are adequate for advancing towards the evaluation of the measurement and using PLS-SEM technique, implemented in the SmartPLS 4 software.

Model evaluation using the PLS algorithm

This model consists of a total of ten latent variables: five corresponding to employer branding attributes (located on the left side of the graph), and five variables representing the dimensions of employee branding (on the right side). It should be noted that this is a reflective model, which means that the latent variables determine the observable variables (Kline, 2016). This relationship is represented by the arrows that start from each construct and point to their respective items. Additionally, and considering the hypotheses proposed, the model presents nine relationships between employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions, the latter being the dependent variables and the former the independent variables. Subsequently, the structural model was evaluated using the PLS algorithm. This stage allowed us to obtain the factor loadings for each item, the standardized regression coefficients, and the R^2 values for the endogenous variables. These results offer an initial approximation of the model fit, allowing us to identify the quality of the relationships between the latent constructs and their respective indicators, as well as the explanatory power of the model. Based on this information, it is possible to make relevant adjustments, such as eliminating items with loadings below the recommended thresholds or reviewing weak relationships between variables to improve the validity and reliability of the model.

Results of the PLS algorithm

Four iterations were conducted in which model adjustments were implemented to improve key indicators and measures to enhance the reliability and quality of the model. These adjustments and changes are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6.
Adjustments Made to the Initial Model

Item removed	Associated construct	Justification
CB2	Compensation and Benefits	Low factor loading
TD3	Training and Development	Low factor loading and marginal contribution to AVE
PBHRM1	Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	Low loading and poor consistency with the rest of the items in the construct
PBHRM3	Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	Insufficient loading and partially redundant content
PBHRM7	Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	Weak loading and increased VIF
PBHRM9	Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	Loading below 0.70 and redundant content with PBHRM8
PBTL2	Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	High loading, but VIF > 5 (collinearity problems)
PBTL4	Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	Low loading in previous models
PBTL5	Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	Loading < 0.70 and inconsistency with the rest of the items
PEBP4	Perceived External Brand Prestige	Item not appropriate for the SMEs context; low convergent validity
Work-Life Balance	Work-Life Balance (completely removed)	Poor reliability ($\alpha = 0.487$) and low contextual adequacy; items not representative in SMEs

Note: Author's own work.

Considering the adjustments presented above, the final model is presented in [Figure 2](#).

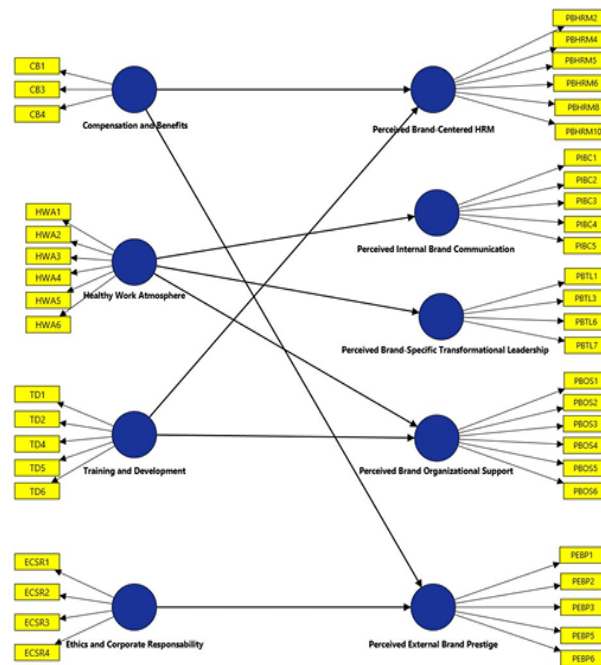


Figura 2. Final Structural Model.

Note: Author's own work.

The previous model was chosen as the most appropriate, as it presents optimal indicators for all constructs and items. In this regard, the final model consists of nine constructs, forty-four items, and eight relationships between constructs. This model was initially evaluated using the PLS algorithm and subsequently using the bootstrapping method. Below are key indicators that allow us to verify the suitability of the model. First, the external loadings and VIFs for each item are presented in [Table A2](#) (see Appendices). From the table above, all items have external loadings greater than 0.7, indicating high convergent validity and good representation of the constructs to which they belong. Additionally, the VIF values for all items are below 5, indicating that there are no collinearity problems between the indicators. Otherwise, [Table 7](#) presents reliability and convergent validity indicators for all latent constructs in the model.

Table 7.
Reliability and Convergent Validity of Constructs Final Model

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Rho_A	Rho_C	AVE
Compensation and Benefits	0.602	0.601	0.787	0.553
Ethics and Corporate Responsibility	0.821	0.836	0.882	0.652
Healthy Work Atmosphere	0.907	0.914	0.929	0.685
Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.943	0.944	0.955	0.778
Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	0.898	0.905	0.922	0.664
Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	0.945	0.945	0.960	0.858
Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.947	0.947	0.959	0.825
Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.913	0.914	0.935	0.743
Training and Development	0.896	0.900	0.923	0.707

Note: Author's own work.

According to the table above, it is evident that all constructs exceed the minimum value of 0.7 for Cronbach's Alpha, except for the Compensation and Benefits variable (0.602), which remains within acceptable limits given its nature and the adjustments made. Additionally, in terms of composite reliability (Rho_C), all constructs have values above 0.7, indicating adequate reliability of the scales used. Finally, analyzing the AVE, all constructs exceed the minimum value of 0.5, confirming that each one explains a significant proportion of the variance of its items.

Coefficients of determination

To validate the explanatory power of the model on the dependent variables, [Table 8](#) presents a summary of the R² values and their significance.

Table 8.

Coefficients of Determination Final Model

Dependent Variable	R ²	t-value	p-value	IC 2.5%	IC 97.5%
Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.659	33.679	0.000	0.621	0.697
Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	0.672	32.199	0.000	0.630	0.712
Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	0.533	20.317	0.000	0.480	0.584
Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.535	20.572	0.000	0.485	0.586
Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.481	17.434	0.000	0.427	0.536

Note: Author's own work.

The R² values show that the model has moderate-high explanatory power for the endogenous constructs (the dimensions of employee branding). For example, 67.2% of the variance in the Perceived Brand-Centred HRM dimension and 65.9% of the variance in Perceived Brand Organizational Support are explained by the corresponding independent variables. Similarly, all R² values are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and have narrow confidence intervals, indicating accuracy in the estimates.

The table above shows that the model has acceptable to good explanatory power for the endogenous variables. Thus, the PBHRM (0.672) and PBOS (0.659) constructs have moderate to high levels of explanatory power. Otherwise, PIBC (0.481), PBSTL (0.533) and PEBP (0.535) have moderate explanatory power. Finally, [Table 9](#) presents a summary of the path coefficients (β) and f^2 values, which allows us to identify the effect size of the independent constructs and the strength of the relationship between constructs, respectively.

Table 9.

Path Coefficients and f^2 Effects Final Model

Construct	β	f^2
Compensation and Benefits -> Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	0.266	0.155
Compensation and Benefits -> Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.268	0.089
Ethics and Corporate Responsibility -> Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.528	0.346
Healthy Work Atmosphere -> Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.607	0.563
Healthy Work Atmosphere -> Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	0.730	1.143
Healthy Work Atmosphere -> Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.693	0.926
Training and Development -> Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.264	0.106
Training and Development -> Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	0.646	0.908

Note: Author's own work.

The standardized regression coefficients of the final model indicate strong relationships between various constructs. The Healthy Work Atmosphere proved to have the strongest effects, particularly on the Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership dimension ($\beta = 0.730$; $f^2 = 1.143$), followed by Perceived Brand Organizational Support ($\beta = 0.607$; $f^2 = 0.563$). Additionally, the Training and Development attribute had a significant impact on the Perceived Brand-Centred HRM dimension ($\beta = 0.646$; $f^2 = 0.908$). As for the effects of the Ethics and Corporate Responsibility attribute, it had a considerable influence on the Perceived External Brand Prestige dimension ($\beta = 0.528$; $f^2 = 0.346$). Finally, Compensation and Benefits had moderate effects on Perceived Brand-Centred HRM ($f^2 = 0.155$) and small effects on Perceived External Brand Prestige ($f^2 = 0.089$), suggesting that its role is relevant but not the most decisive in the model. Model evaluation using the bootstrapping algorithm

Bootstrapping is used to evaluate the statistical significance of estimated parameters such as path coefficients or loadings, allowing standard errors, confidence intervals, and model stability and reliability to be calculated. In short, this technique helps to determine the overall fit of the estimated model, determining whether the effects and relationships in the model are statistically significant and dependable (Hair et al., 2017; Benitez, Henseler, Castillo, Schuberth., 2020). In this investigation, the bootstrapping method was used in SmartPLS 4 software under the following parameters presented in Table 10, using a sample of 1,160 responses.

Table 10.

Parameters Used to Evaluate the Final Model With the Bootstrapping Method

Parameter	Selected option
Subsamples	5,000
Confidence interval method	Bias-corrected accelerated confidence intervals (BCa)
Type of test	Two tails
Significance level	5%
Random number generator	Fixed seed

Note: Author's own work.

Regression coefficients and their significance

This section examined the t-values, p-values, and confidence intervals corrected for bias and acceleration, which are presented in Table 11. In this way, it is possible to determine which relationships between constructs are statistically significant and contribute significantly to the proposed model.

Table 11.

Path Coefficients and Significance

Construct	Coefficient (O)	t-value	p-value	2.5%	97.5%
Compensation and Benefits -> Perceived Brand- Centred HRM	0.266	11.485	0.000	0.221	0.312
Compensation and Benefits -> Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.268	8.669	0.000	0.206	0.327
Ethics and Corporate Responsibility -> Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.528	18.713	0.000	0.475	0.586
Healthy Work Atmosphere -> Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.607	23.493	0.000	0.556	0.658
Healthy Work Atmosphere -> Perceived Brand- Specific Transformational Leadership	0.730	40.553	0.000	0.693	0.764
Healthy Work Atmosphere -> Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.693	34.822	0.000	0.653	0.732
Training and Development -> Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.264	9.649	0.000	0.210	0.317
Training and Development -> Perceived Brand- Centred HRM	0.646	32.541	0.000	0.606	0.683

Note: Author's own work.

From the table above, all regression coefficients obtained using bootstrapping are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), with t-values above the critical threshold of 1.96 for a confidence level of 95%.

Effect size

Based on the f^2 values, it is possible to evaluate the magnitude of the effect that independent variables have on an endogenous construct. These values can range from 0.020 to 0.150, indicating a weak effect; 0.150 to 0.350, indicating a medium effect; and values above 0.350, indicating a strong effect (Benitez et al., 2020). It is evident that all the effects that exogenous variables have on endogenous variables are medium to large in size, with the effect of the Healthy Work Atmosphere attribute on the Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership dimension being the largest of all the relationships between the constructs ($f^2 = 1.143$). Similarly, this attribute also had a considerable effect on the Perceived Brand Organizational Support dimension ($f^2 = 0.563$). Finally, the lowest effect of an exogenous variable on an endogenous variable is that of Compensation and Benefits on the Perceived External Brand Prestige dimension ($f^2 = 0.089$).

Global model adjustment

The overall adjustment of the model is performed by evaluating the difference between the empirical variance-covariance matrix of the indicators and the counterpart implied by the model. For the purposes of this study, the Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR) metric was used, which is considered acceptable when it is less than 0.080 (Benitez et al., 2020). Table 12 presents the overall adjustment values for the final model.

Table 12

Overall Fit of the Final Model

Model	SRMR	IC 95%	IC 99%
Saturated	0.051	0.027	0.028
Estimated	0.134	0.044	0.047

Note: Author's own work.

According to this assessment, the model yielded an SRMR value of 0.134, which exceeds the recommended threshold, indicating that the model fit can be considered moderate or improvable. However, given that the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity indicators are within acceptable ranges, the model is still considered useful for the purposes of this research.

Structural model hypothesis testing

It is necessary to evaluate the statistical significance of the relationships between the constructs of the model, which allows us to accept or reject the hypotheses proposed in this study. Table 13 summarizes the results of the hypothesis testing based on the effect sizes (f^2), t-values and p-values obtained using the bootstrapping algorithm.

Table 13

Results of Hypothesis Testing for the Structural Model

Hypothesis	Proposed relationship	f^2	t-value	p-value	Result
H1a	Compensation and Benefits → Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	0.155	5.029	0.000	Accepted
H1b	Training and Development → Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	0.908	9.137	0.000	Accepted
H1c	Work-Life Balance → Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	–	–	–	Eliminated

Continued on the next page

Hypothesis	Proposed relationship	f ²	t-value	p-value	Result
H2	Healthy Work Atmosphere → Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.926	8.945	0.000	Accepted
H3	Healthy Work Atmosphere → Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	1.143	9.405	0.000	Accepted
H4a	Healthy Work Atmosphere → Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.563	8.437	0.000	Accepted
H4b	Training and Development → Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.106	4.509	0.000	Accepted
H5a	Ethics and Corporate Responsibility → Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.346	7.522	0.000	Accepted
H5b	Compensation and Benefits → Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.089	4.002	0.000	Accepted

Note: Author's own work.

As can be seen in the table above, all the hypotheses proposed in the final model were statistically significant, with t-values greater than 1.96 and p-values less than 0.05, which supports the proposed theoretical relationships. However, the strongest effects are evident in the relationships between Healthy Work Atmosphere and the dimensions Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership ($f^2 = 1.143$), Perceived Internal Brand Communication ($f^2 = 0.926$) and Perceived Brand Organizational Support ($f^2 = 0.563$), which highlights the role of this attribute in strengthening the relationship between employees and the brand.

It is important to mention that hypothesis H1c, which relates to the Work-Life Balance attribute and the Perceived Brand-Centred HRM dimension, was eliminated from the final model after a process of theoretical and empirical refinement, as it did not show a statistically significant relationship in the previous statistical analysis. Thus, the results obtained using the bootstrapping technique support the validity of the proposed structural model, confirming that the employer branding attributes selected for this study have a positive and significant effect on the dimensions of employee branding in the context of the Colombian SMEs analyzed.

5. Discussion

It is necessary to discuss the conceptual meaning of the relationship between employer branding and employee branding. Indeed, although the attributes of the former might appear to be actions typical of traditional human resource management, they become elements of employer branding when they are communicated, perceived and interpreted by employees as signals consistent with the organization's identity and value proposition; that is to say, when the actions implemented through HRM have a strategic purpose aimed at improving an organization's image as an employer and attracting and retaining employees who are best aligned with the company's values and culture ([Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004](#)). Put another way, whilst human resource management seeks functional efficiency, employer branding seeks to build meaning, a sense of belonging and reputation, both internally and externally.

Three key mechanisms emerge from the process mentioned above that explain the relationship between the two constructs: perception, when employees' actions are interpreted as a reflection of their value proposition and their values; internalization, when employees succeed in incorporating these values into their self-concept, thereby generating organizational identification ([Ashforth and Mael, 1989](#)); and expression, when that identification translates into behaviors and attitudes consistent with the brand ([Miles & Mangold, 2004](#); [King and Grace, 2008](#)). Thus, employee branding constitutes the behavioral manifestation of employer branding: the observable evidence of an internalized corporate identity. From the perspective of the Value-Based Theory (VBR) ([Barney, 1991](#)), these processes represent strategic intangible resources, as they are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable, thereby conferring a sustainable competitive advantage on the organization.

Continuing with the discussion of the relationships proposed between the attributes and dimensions through the theoretical model, a possible relationship was first established between the employer branding attribute Compensation and Benefits and Perceived Brand-Centred HRM, bearing in mind that the latter influences employees by fostering positive behaviors and attitudes towards the brand in them ([Chang et al., 2012](#)). These practices traditionally include recruitment, training and development, performance appraisal, remuneration and flexible working arrangements ([Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016](#)). However, according to [Darlington \(2005\)](#), activities relating to remuneration and other benefits and incentives are linked to high employee performance. Consequently, remuneration has motivational value and requires the organization to design an effective and fair remuneration system ([Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016](#)). However, according to the results obtained from this study in Colombian SMEs, it was found that the relationship between the two constructs is positive ($\beta=0.266$), significant ($p<0.001$) and consistent ($f^2=0.155$). These findings suggest that, in Colombian SMEs, remuneration not only generates job satisfaction but also reinforces the perception of consistency between what the organization promises and what it delivers, thereby strengthening the symbolic connection between the employee and the brand.

Moving on to the 'Healthy Work Atmosphere' attribute, this was found to have the strongest and most significant relationships with three dimensions of employee branding. In line with the theory reviewed, a relationship was established with the dimension of 'Perceived Internal Brand Communication', as, according to [Araújo and Miranda \(2020\)](#), the organizational context is important for understanding internal communication. Indeed, the authors note that internal communication depends on the organizational environment in which employees actively participate by sharing and interpreting messages. Thus, by comparing the data collected with the analysis of that data, it became evident that the relationship between these two constructs proved to be one of the strongest and most significant in the model, with a high effect size ($f^2=0.926$) and a fairly robust standardized coefficient ($\beta=0.693$). This demonstrates that, when organizations foster a working environment characterized by respect, trust, emotional well-being and collaboration, employees perceive the brand's messages and objectives clearly, effectively and consistently. This process is consistent with the proposals of Social Identity Theory, as when a company successfully communicates its value proposition, values and objectives, employees tend to identify with their organization ([Ellemers et al., 2004](#)).

A relationship was established between a healthy work atmosphere and the dimension of perceived brand-specific transformational leadership; like [Sujchaphong et al. \(2020\)](#), transformational leaders are characterized by creating a healthy environment for employees in which they act as role models for their subordinates, stimulate them intellectually and provide support and assistance when employees require it. In fact, this relationship was the strongest in the model, with a remarkably high standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.730$) and an extremely large effect size ($f^2 = 1.143$). This confirms the hypothesis put forward by the theory, as it allows us to infer that a working environment characterized by trust, respect, collaboration and the psychological well-being of employees is a key facilitator for the development and perception of transformational leaders within the organization. Such leaders not only inspire, motivate and foster commitment, but also act as brand ambassadors.

For the above attribute, a third relationship was identified with another dimension of employee branding: perceived brand organizational support. According to [Eisenberger et al. \(1986\)](#), when employees perceive that they are in an environment where their contributions are valued, a work-life balance is promoted and the organization cares for its staff; they associate this with a perception of support provided by the employer. However, the study conducted on employees of SMEs in Colombia confirmed that the relationship between these two constructs was one of the strongest, with a high standardized coefficient ($\beta=0.607$) and a considerable effect size ($f^2=0.563$). This confirms the findings of Social Exchange Theory, according to which, when employees perceive that their organization cares about them, their well-being and their development, they will exhibit positive behaviors in response to their employer's efforts.

Moving on to the Training and Development attribute, and drawing on the theory, a link was established with the dimension of human resource management centred on perceived brand (Perceived Brand-Centred HRM). Considering the findings of [Cardy et al. \(2007\)](#), who state that Brand-Centred HRM practices include

training and assessment activities, which contribute to improved employee performance by increasing their commitment to the organization through the promotion of skills development and employee growth ([Tanwar and Prasad, 2017](#)). The above hypothesis was confirmed by the study's results, as this relationship proved to be the third strongest within the model, with a large effect size ($\beta=0.646$; $f^2=0.908$). This finding is relevant in the context of SMEs, as they have limited resources; nevertheless, it was demonstrated that investment in brand-oriented development programs has a significant impact on brand-centred human resource management that is consistent with organizational values.

The above attribute was also linked to the dimension of perceived brand organizational support; according to the literature reviewed, it was found that when organizations invest in training programmes, mentoring initiatives or psychological support mechanisms, employees' perception of their employer improves, as they come to understand that the employer cares about their wellbeing and development. This results in greater employee commitment and empowerment, improving their performance at work ([Rozikan et al., 2024](#); [Ergun et al., 2025](#)). However, the results of this study showed that the relationship between these constructs is positive and significant ($\beta=0.264$), with a small but relevant effect size ($f^2=0.106$).

The employer branding attribute relating to ethics and corporate social responsibility (Ethics and Corporate Responsibility) was linked to the dimension of perceived external brand prestige (Perceived External Brand Prestige), bearing in mind that [Kim et al. \(2010\)](#) state that CSR practices influence third parties' perceptions of an organization, provided that these are effectively communicated both internally and externally so that they are known to all stakeholders. Similarly, [De Roeck et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasizes how these good practices and socially responsible actions foster a sense of identity amongst employees when they perceive that their company enjoys a good reputation within society and the market. Based on the analysis of the data collected, it was found that this relationship is positive, significant and robust, with an excellent standardized regression coefficient ($\beta=0.528$) and a large effect size ($f^2=0.346$). This result is consistent with the Resource-Based View, and in particular with the work of [Uyanik \(2023\)](#), who argues that brand reputation can be regarded as a scarce and difficult-to-imitate resource, which can be built upon the good practices an organization adopts in the market and within society.

Finally, it is important to note that, during the process of refining the initially proposed model, it was decided to remove the employer branding attribute relating to work-life balance. This decision was based on statistical and contextual grounds; firstly, the construct presented issues of reliability and validity, reflected in a low Cronbach's alpha (0.543) and an AVE just above the minimum threshold (AVE = 0.507), in addition to several items having very weak factor loadings. Secondly, from a theoretical and contextual perspective, it was found that the statements associated with this attribute—such as flexible working hours, remote working or the availability of sports facilities—did not fully apply to the context of SMEs in Colombia, which limited its ability to adequately capture employees' perceptions. Thus, the removal of this variable helped to improve the quality and validity of the model and raises an important point for consideration regarding how certain employer branding attributes, most of which are designed to be assessed in large enterprises, may not be applicable or suitable for measuring the same aspects in smaller-scale enterprises.

6. Conclusions

The main objective of this research was to determine the relationship between employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions in SMEs in Colombia. To achieve this objective, the research question was formulated: What is the relationship between employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions in this type of organization? From an empirical and practical perspective, the question was answered by collecting and analyzing 1,160 valid responses to a survey carried out by employees of SMEs from different sectors and regions of the country.

Using a PLS-SEM implemented in SmartPLS 4 software, the relationship between employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions was evaluated, thus testing the hypotheses formulated. The

findings revealed significant relationships between the constructs, which allowed the proposed model to be validated. The results confirm that there is a significant relationship between several employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions. Specifically, it was found that attributes such as Healthy Work Environment, Training and Development, and Corporate Ethics and Responsibility, are key variables in shaping employees' perceptions and behaviors towards the employer brand.

The relationship between the attribute of Healthy Work Environment, and the brand-oriented dimension of Perceived Transformational Leadership, proved to be the strongest in the model, with a path coefficient of 0.730. The relationship between this attribute and the dimension of Perceived Internal Brand Communication was the second strongest in the model, followed by the relationship with the dimension of Perceived Brand Support. This reinforces what has been found in the literature, namely that a positive work environment significantly affects employees' perception of transformational leadership, the quality of internal communication within the organization, and the perception of organizational support received by a company's employees.

The consistent and strategic implementation of marketing principles in human resources, such as creating an attractive brand identity, improves the external perception of a company and, in turn, fosters a Healthy Work Environment, contributing to the development of a greater sense of belonging, organizational identification and, consequently, better employee performance. This link between marketing and human resources highlights the need for effective coordination between both areas to ensure that brand messages are consistent and have a real impact on the internal dynamics of an organization.

Limitations

This research provides relevant evidence on the relationship between employer branding attributes and employee branding dimensions in SMEs in Colombia. However, it is worth acknowledging certain methodological and contextual limitations of this study, which must be considered when interpreting the results, as well as identifying opportunities for future studies to expand upon and explore this line of research in greater depth. Firstly, the sample was selected using non-probabilistic convenience sampling, which means that participants were not chosen at random. This implies that selection bias may have been present and, consequently, limits the possibility of generalizing the results to the entire population of Colombian SMEs.

There may have been a response bias whilst participants were completing the questionnaire, particularly social desirability bias. In this regard, given that this study assessed issues relating to organizational ethics, transformational leadership and brand prestige, it is likely that some respondents provided answers perceived as socially acceptable or politically correct, even though anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. To mitigate this risk, future research could supplement the questionnaire with qualitative interviews to capture more genuine perceptions.

Although scales previously designed and validated by other authors were used, these were originally developed in different organizational contexts, specifically in large enterprises. However, whilst careful translation and cultural adaptation of these instruments was carried out, it is recognized that these scales were not designed for SMEs; consequently, there may be differences in the way employees in these organizations interpret certain items. Added to this is the fact that, as evidenced by literature reviews, no empirically validated models were found that integrate the constructions of employer branding and employee branding within the context of SMEs. Whilst this represents a methodological limitation for this study, it highlights the need to develop measurement instruments better suited to the specific characteristics of this type of organization, considering the particularities of the region or country in which these enterprises are located.

Similarly, and as was confirmed during the analysis of the results, there was one employer branding attribute that was not relevant to the context of SMEs. Consequently, the attribute 'Work-Life Balance' was removed from the structural model used in this research. However, this construct could be useful in other contexts or in larger organizations; it is therefore suggested that, in future studies, the relevance of this attribute be reassessed, or that it be restructured, or that additional attributes be included to capture the essence of the employer branding strategies that SMEs in Colombia can implement.

With regard to geographical representativeness, whilst the main objective of this research was to evaluate the two variables in Colombian SMEs, the data collected did not come from all regions of the country, nor was it stratified by city or geographical location. Thus, although enterprises located in different cities across the country were able to participate, a proportional sample was not designed to enable employer branding and employee branding to be measured uniformly and accurately across all cities, departments or regions of the country. Consequently, this research should be understood as an initial exploration of the topic within the Colombian context, the results of which reflect the reality of a subset of SMEs, without it being possible to assume that they are representative of all SMEs in the country.

Individual variables such as length of service and the employee's position within the organization were not controlled, as these may influence an employee's perception and image of their employer. It is likely that employees with longer service or in leadership positions perceive aspects such as the working environment, leadership or organizational support differently. For this reason, future research should consider these variables as potential moderators or carry out subgroup analyses to identify differences based on an employee's length of service and position. Finally, of the data collected and analyzed, only that obtained from questionnaires based on employees' subjective perceptions was included. This means that the model does not include objective indicators of organizational performance, productivity, staff turnover or working atmosphere; these aspects could be addressed by future studies on the subject in question.

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Data Availability

The article provides the relevant data sources and links.

Disclosure statement

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Disclaimer

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Appendix A

Table A1

Internal Reliability Statistics by Attribute/Dimension

Attribute/Dimension	Item	Corrected item-total	Squared multiple correlation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted	Attribute/Dimension Cronbach's alpha
Healthy Work Atmosphere	HWA1	0.757	0.587	0.886	0.905
	HWA2	0.798	0.655	0.880	
	HWA3	0.635	0.43	0.904	
	HWA4	0.742	0.577	0.889	
	HWA5	0.727	0.541	0.891	
	HWA6	0.799	0.645	0.881	
Training and Development	TD1	0.689	0.56	0.859	0.879
	TD2	0.739	0.61	0.849	
	TD3	0.449	0.217	0.894	
	TD4	0.815	0.682	0.836	
	TD5	0.79	0.669	0.843	
	TD6	0.654	0.503	0.864	
Work-Life Balance	WLB1	0.326	0.113	0.487	0.543
	WLB2	0.424	0.18	0.328	
	WLB3	0.336	0.12	0.472	
Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility	ECSR1	0.681	0.47	0.741	0.813
	ECSR2	0.657	0.455	0.761	
	ECSR3	0.663	0.465	0.751	
	ECSR4	0.562	0.32	0.809	
Compensation and Benefits	CB1	0.414	0.178	0.595	0.651
	CB2	0.454	0.213	0.580	
	CB3	0.464	0.255	0.589	
	CB4	0.454	0.263	0.566	
Perceived Brand- Specific Transformational Leadership	PBTL1	0.86	0.747	0.972	0.973
	PBTL2	0.899	0.813	0.969	
	PBTL3	0.905	0.833	0.969	
	PBTL4	0.936	0.891	0.966	
	PBTL5	0.927	0.872	0.967	
	PBTL6	0.901	0.817	0.969	
	PBTL7	0.883	0.787	0.970	
Perceived Brand-Centred HRM	PBHRM1	0.629	0.535	0.930	0.932
	PBHRM2	0.697	0.618	0.927	
	PBHRM3	0.751	0.654	0.925	
	PBHRM4	0.764	0.708	0.923	
	PBHRM5	0.745	0.695	0.924	
	PBHRM6	0.768	0.601	0.923	
	PBHRM7	0.733	0.602	0.925	
	PBHRM8	0.789	0.738	0.922	
	PBHRM9	0.738	0.671	0.925	
	PBHRM10	0.725	0.574	0.926	

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Attribute/Dimension	Item	Corrected item-total	Squared multiple correlation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted	Attribute/Dimension Cronbach's alpha
Perceived Internal Brand Communication	PIBC1	0.784	0.696	0.890	0.912
	PIBC2	0.81	0.742	0.885	
	PIBC3	0.795	0.673	0.889	
	PIBC4	0.741	0.655	0.900	
	PIBC5	0.758	0.667	0.896	
Perceived Brand Organizational Support	PBOS1	0.764	0.592	0.939	0.942
	PBOS2	0.85	0.732	0.929	
	PBOS3	0.849	0.734	0.929	
	PBOS4	0.854	0.744	0.928	
	PBOS5	0.856	0.745	0.928	
	PBOS6	0.787	0.638	0.936	
Perceived External Brand Prestige	PEBP1	0.831	0.7	0.954	0.958
	PEBP2	0.869	0.77	0.949	
	PEBP3	0.877	0.781	0.948	
	PEBP4	0.897	0.811	0.947	
	PEBP5	0.87	0.764	0.95	
	PEBP6	0.861	0.76	0.95	

Note: Author's own work.

Table A2

External Loads and VIF for Each Item Final Model

Item	Outer loadings	VIF
CB1 <- Compensation and Benefits	0.745	1.111
CB3 <- Compensation and Benefits	0.747	1.305
CB4 <- Compensation and Benefits	0.738	1.326
ECSR1 <- Ethics and Corporate Responsibility	0.848	1.886
ECSR2 <- Ethics and Corporate Responsibility	0.819	1.833
ECSR3 <- Ethics and Corporate Responsibility	0.837	1.869
ECSR4 <- Ethics and Corporate Responsibility	0.718	1.470
HWA1 <- Healthy Work Atmosphere	0.840	2.420
HWA2 <- Healthy Work Atmosphere	0.872	2.897
HWA3 <- Healthy Work Atmosphere	0.728	1.755
HWA4 <- Healthy Work Atmosphere	0.838	2.364
HWA5 <- Healthy Work Atmosphere	0.811	2.177
HWA6 <- Healthy Work Atmosphere	0.869	2.820
PBHRM10 <- Perceived Brand-Centered HRM	0.785	2.178
PBHRM2 <- Perceived Brand-Centered HRM	0.743	1.768
PBHRM4 <- Perceived Brand-Centered HRM	0.862	3.271
PBHRM5 <- Perceived Brand-Centered HRM	0.852	3.218
PBHRM6 <- Perceived Brand-Centered HRM	0.832	2.328
PBHRM8 <- Perceived Brand-Centered HRM	0.809	2.381

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Item	Outer loadings	VIF
PBOS1 <- Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.836	2.452
PBOS2 <- Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.900	3.732
PBOS3 <- Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.898	3.757
PBOS4 <- Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.902	3.900
PBOS5 <- Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.903	3.920
PBOS6 <- Perceived Brand Organizational Support	0.852	2.763
PBTL1 <- Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	0.912	3.457
PBTL3 <- Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	0.931	4.224
PBTL6 <- Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	0.937	4.709
PBTL7 <- Perceived Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership	0.925	4.135
PEBP1 <- Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.888	3.107
PEBP2 <- Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.915	4.264
PEBP3 <- Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.919	4.361
PEBP5 <- Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.915	4.128
PEBP6 <- Perceived External Brand Prestige	0.904	3.654
PIBC1 <- Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.870	3.286
PIBC2 <- Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.889	3.875
PIBC3 <- Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.879	3.062
PIBC4 <- Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.828	2.896
PIBC5 <- Perceived Internal Brand Communication	0.840	2.999
TD1 <- Training and Development	0.791	2.254
TD2 <- Training and Development	0.842	2.562
TD4 <- Training and Development	0.890	3.059
TD5 <- Training and Development	0.885	3.009
TD6 <- Training and Development	0.790	1.999

Note: Author's own work.