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Designing an Employer Brand Model in Iran's Mining Industries

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ABSTRACT

Employer branding, as the perceived image of an organization among employees and job seekers, plays a key role in attracting, retaining, and motivating talent. The present study was conducted with the aim of designing an employer brand model in Iran's mining industries. This research adopted a qualitative approach and employed qualitative content analysis. The research population consisted of experts in Iran's mineral products industry, and sampling was carried out using the snowball method until data saturation was achieved. Ultimately, 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts from large mining companies. Data analysis was performed using MAXQDA software, and a conceptual model was extracted. The core phenomenon of the model is the "formation and dynamics of employer brand perception in Iran's mining industries." Causal conditions include competitive compensation, job security, development opportunities, sanctions, meritocracy, and job hardship. Contextual conditions encompass ownership structure, organizational scale, geographical characteristics, and the contractor ratio. Intervening conditions include labor market competition, macro-environmental factors, and discriminatory behaviors. The proposed strategies involve enhancing safety and welfare, developing human capital, and establishing a fair compensation system. Positive consequences include talent attraction, employee retention, organizational commitment, productivity, and reputation, while negative consequences include employee turnover, workforce aging, dependence on contractors, reduced productivity, and safety incidents. This model represents the first indigenous employer branding framework for Iran's mining industries and offers practical recommendations for managers and policymakers.

Keywords: Employer branding; Iran's mining industries; conceptual model; qualitative content analysis; grounded theory

Introduction

In contemporary organizational environments characterized by intensified competition, rapid technological change, and shifting workforce expectations, the concept of employer branding has emerged as a strategic response to challenges related to talent attraction, retention, and performance. Employer branding refers to the process through which organizations define, communicate, and sustain a distinctive and attractive identity as an employer in the minds of current and potential employees. Unlike traditional corporate branding, which primarily targets consumers and external stakeholders, employer branding focuses on the employment value proposition and the symbolic and functional benefits associated with working for a particular organization (1, 2). As labor markets

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become increasingly knowledge-driven and employee-centric, organizations can no longer rely solely on financial incentives; instead, they must cultivate a compelling employer brand that aligns organizational values with employee expectations (3, 4).

Recent studies emphasize that employer branding is not merely a human resource tactic but a multidimensional strategic construct with implications for organizational performance, employee engagement, and long-term sustainability (5, 6). A strong employer brand enhances organizational attractiveness, improves recruitment efficiency, and reduces turnover costs, while also fostering psychological attachment and discretionary effort among employees (7, 8). Empirical evidence indicates that employees who perceive their organization as a reputable and supportive employer demonstrate higher levels of engagement, empowerment, and performance (9, 10). Consequently, employer branding has evolved into a core component of strategic human resource management and organizational communication.

The growing academic interest in employer branding has resulted in a diverse body of literature addressing its dimensions, antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes. Bibliometric analyses show a significant increase in employer branding research over the past decade, reflecting its relevance across sectors and geographical contexts (11). Scholars have conceptualized employer branding through various lenses, including signaling theory, social identity theory, and resource-based views, highlighting its role in shaping employee perceptions and competitive advantage (12, 13). At the same time, measurement frameworks and adapted scales have been developed to capture employer branding dimensions across different cultural and regional settings, particularly in emerging and transitional economies (14).

A consistent theme in the literature is the centrality of organizational practices in shaping employer brand perceptions. Compensation systems, career development opportunities, work–life balance, internal communication, leadership style, and corporate social responsibility have all been identified as key drivers of employer brand attractiveness (15, 16). Studies further demonstrate that employer branding operates both externally, by influencing job seekers' attraction, and internally, by reinforcing employees' sense of belonging and organizational commitment (3, 8). In this sense, employer branding functions as a bridge between human resource practices and organizational identity, integrating strategic intent with everyday employee experiences.

In parallel with global research, a growing body of studies has examined employer branding in specific national and organizational contexts, including public organizations, banks, hospitals, and industrial enterprises. Research conducted in Iran highlights the importance of contextualizing employer branding models to reflect institutional structures, cultural norms, and labor market realities (17, 18). For example, employer branding models developed in the banking sector emphasize trust, job security, and perceived fairness as critical elements influencing employee attraction and retention (19). Similarly, studies in the oil and energy industry underscore the role of corporate social responsibility and organizational legitimacy in shaping employer brand perceptions in high-risk and capital-intensive environments (20, 21).

Despite these advances, the majority of employer branding research has focused on service industries, knowledge-intensive firms, and consumer-facing organizations, with comparatively limited attention to extractive and heavy industries. This gap is noteworthy given that industries such as mining face distinctive challenges, including hazardous working conditions, remote geographical locations, cyclical commodity markets, and strong dependence on specialized technical labor. These characteristics fundamentally shape employees' expectations and perceptions of employers, suggesting that employer branding in such contexts may be driven by different mechanisms than those identified in service-oriented settings (13, 22).

Furthermore, external environmental pressures play a particularly salient role in shaping employer branding in industrial contexts. Macroeconomic instability, international sanctions, inflation, and regulatory constraints can directly influence organizational capacity to offer competitive compensation, job security, and development opportunities (5, 12). Research indicates that under conditions of uncertainty, employer branding becomes both more challenging and more critical, as employees place greater emphasis on stability, fairness, and long-term prospects (2, 6). In such environments, inconsistencies between employer brand promises and actual employment practices can quickly erode trust and damage organizational reputation (4).

Another emerging strand of research highlights the changing expectations of workforce demographics, particularly younger generations. Studies show that Generation Z and Millennials evaluate employers not only on economic rewards but also on values, development opportunities, digital presence, and authenticity (23, 24). Social media and digital platforms have amplified the visibility of employer brands, enabling employees and candidates to actively shape and disseminate employer-related narratives (25, 26). As a result, employer branding has become increasingly transparent and interactive, reducing organizational control over employer image while increasing the importance of coherent and credible branding strategies.

The integration of employer branding with broader branding and communication frameworks further underscores its strategic significance. Research demonstrates spillover effects between employer branding and corporate branding, consumer trust, and organizational reputation (16, 25). A strong employer brand can enhance external brand equity, while reputational crises or negative employment practices can undermine both employee morale and customer perceptions (5, 14). This interdependence reinforces the need for holistic models that account for internal and external stakeholders, as well as contextual and environmental factors.

Although several conceptual and empirical models of employer branding have been proposed, scholars increasingly argue that universal models are insufficient to capture sector-specific and country-specific dynamics (12, 27). Contextualized models are particularly necessary in industries characterized by physical risk, skill scarcity, and strong institutional constraints. Existing Iranian studies provide valuable insights but remain fragmented across sectors and methodologies, indicating a need for integrative frameworks grounded in empirical evidence from underexplored industries (17, 18).

In the mining industry, employer branding is closely intertwined with issues of occupational safety, health, job hardship, and long-term employability. Research on value-based employer branding suggests that in demanding work environments, tangible practices such as safety investment and fair compensation carry significant symbolic value, shaping employees' sense of respect and organizational care (22, 24). At the same time, structural factors such as ownership patterns, contractor reliance, and organizational scale influence the credibility and sustainability of employer branding efforts (13, 19).

Taken together, the existing literature highlights the strategic importance of employer branding while also revealing conceptual and empirical gaps related to industrial contexts and emerging economies. There is limited understanding of how causal factors, contextual conditions, and intervening environmental forces interact to shape employer brand perceptions in the mining sector, particularly within the Iranian institutional and economic setting. Addressing this gap requires an in-depth, context-sensitive approach capable of capturing the complexity and dynamics of employer branding as experienced by organizational actors.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to design a comprehensive and context-specific employer branding model for Iran’s mining industries based on empirical evidence and systematic analysis of expert perspectives.

Methods and Materials

The present study, conducted with the aim of designing an employer brand model in Iran’s mining industries, adopted a qualitative approach and employed qualitative content analysis. This method was selected because of its capability to uncover patterns, categories, and latent relationships within textual data, making it suitable for examining the complex phenomenon of employer branding in the specific context of Iran’s mining industry.

Qualitative content analysis enables the extraction of conceptual categories from the real experiences of experts and assists the researcher in developing an indigenous framework that is aligned with the cultural, economic, and operational context of this industry.

The study is situated within the interpretive paradigm, as its objective is to achieve an in-depth understanding of experts’ perceptions and experiences of employer branding in the specific context of Iran’s mining industries. A qualitative approach was chosen because employer branding in this sector is multidimensional, dynamic, and context-dependent, and therefore cannot be adequately captured solely through quantitative instruments. By focusing on the semantic content of interviews, qualitative content analysis made it possible to identify core categories and the relationships among them.

The research population consisted of experts in Iran’s mineral products industry who had direct experience in human resources, operations management, safety management, or working in mining environments. Inclusion criteria comprised a minimum of 10 years of work experience in the mining industry, holding a managerial or specialist position, and familiarity with issues related to talent attraction and retention. Sampling was conducted using the snowball method, which is appropriate for accessing hard-to-reach experts in specialized fields. The process began with the identification of three key experts (through professional networks and large mining organizations), each of whom introduced other potential participants. This procedure continued until data saturation was achieved. Ultimately, 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts from major mining companies (such as GolGohar, Chadormalu, IMIDRO, and related contractors). The sample diversity included human resource managers (6 participants), operations and safety managers (5 participants), and senior experts (4 participants) to ensure coverage of multiple perspectives.

The primary data collection instrument was the in-depth semi-structured interview. The interview guide was developed based on initial concepts derived from the literature (such as employer value proposition [EVP], employer attractiveness, and mining-related challenges) and consisted of open-ended questions. Core questions included “How do you perceive your organization as an employer?”, “What factors shape this perception?”, and “What actions does the organization take to manage its employer image?”. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online (with participants’ consent), audio-recorded, and fully transcribed. The average duration of interviews was 70 minutes.

Data analysis was carried out using a directed qualitative content analysis approach with the assistance of MAXQDA software (version 2022). This software facilitated systematic coding, category organization, and visualization of relationships. The analysis process consisted of the following steps:

First, repeated reading of interview transcripts was performed to achieve deep familiarization with the data.

Second, initial coding was conducted by extracting meaning units and performing open coding on the transcribed texts, resulting in the identification of more than 900 initial codes.

Third, category development was undertaken by grouping similar codes into main and subcategories.

Fourth, categories were organized within a conceptual model by positioning them in a paradigmatic framework (core phenomenon, influencing conditions, strategies, and consequences) to construct the final model.

Fifth, review and verification were performed by returning to the original texts and comparing the categories with the literature to ensure data saturation.

The use of MAXQDA enabled automatic reporting of code frequencies, visualization of category networks, and graphical representation of the model, thereby enhancing the rigor of the analysis.

To ensure the quality of the findings, the four main criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were considered.

Credibility was achieved through member checking by presenting summaries of the findings to eight experts and obtaining their confirmation, as well as through source triangulation by integrating the perspectives of managers, specialists, and operational staff.

Dependability was ensured by having a co-researcher independently review and code a portion of the data and by comparing the coding results to confirm the stability of the analytical process.

Confirmability was established through maintaining a detailed audit trail within MAXQDA and documenting all coding steps and analytical decisions, thereby ensuring researcher neutrality.

Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the research context, sample characteristics, and analytical procedures, enabling the application of findings to similar contexts.

Collectively, these measures enhanced the quality of the findings and provided assurance regarding the validity of the extracted conceptual model.

Findings and Results

The findings of the present study were derived from qualitative content analysis of 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with experts from Iran’s mineral products industry. The analysis was performed using MAXQDA software and resulted in the development of a conceptual employer branding model. The core phenomenon identified is the “formation and dynamics of employer brand perception in Iran’s mining industries,” which encompasses the overall perception of the organization as a workplace.

Table 1 presents the frequency of the main categories:

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Subcategories within the Main Categories

Main Category	Number of Subcategories	Frequency Percentage (%)
Causal conditions	6	30
Contextual conditions	4	20
Intervening conditions	3	15
Organizational strategies	3	15
Positive consequences	5	10
Negative consequences	5	10
Total	26	100

This table indicates that causal conditions have the highest frequency and constitute the most direct challenges influencing employer brand perception.

Table 2. Integrated Categories, Subcategories, Frequencies, and Illustrative Evidence in the Employer Brand Model of Iran's Mining Industries

Category	Subcategory	Frequency (Mentions)	Illustrative Evidence (Excerpt)
Causal conditions	Competitive and performance-based compensation	12	"Adequate pay is the primary reason skilled employees stay." (HR manager)
Causal conditions	Job security	11	"Under sanctions, job security is like gold." (Safety expert)
Causal conditions	Career development and succession planning	10	"Without a clear growth path, young employees leave." (Operations manager)
Causal conditions	International sanctions and commodity price volatility (–)	9	"Price volatility destroys stability and harms the employer image." (Senior manager)
Causal conditions	Meritocracy in recruitment and promotion	8	"Merit-based promotion builds trust." (Experienced employee)
Causal conditions	Job hardship and safety risks (–)	13	"Mining work is harsh and risky; without compensation, no one stays." (Operational worker)
Contextual conditions	Ownership structure and corporate governance	10	"State ownership brings stability but slows decision-making." (Senior manager)
Contextual conditions	Organizational scale and organizational age	8	"Large and established firms are more attractive to job seekers." (HR manager)
Contextual conditions	Geographical and climatic characteristics	11	"Remote mines make attraction and retention difficult." (Operations expert)
Contextual conditions	Ratio of direct employment to contracting	9	"Heavy reliance on contractors weakens organizational attachment." (Safety manager)
Intervening conditions	Labor market competition intensity	10	"Strong competition for specialists pulls employees away." (HR manager)
Intervening conditions	Macro-environmental factors	12	"Sanctions and inflation undermine job stability." (Operations manager)
Intervening conditions	Discriminatory and nepotistic behaviors	8	"Favoritism erodes trust and fairness." (Experienced employee)
Organizational strategies	Safety, health, and welfare enhancement	13	"Safety programs are the best retention tools." (Safety manager)
Organizational strategies	Human capital development	11	"Training and succession planning retain young talent." (HR manager)
Organizational strategies	Fair compensation systems	10	"Equitable pay and performance bonuses build trust." (Expert)
Positive consequences	Attraction of top talent	12	"A strong employer brand attracts the best candidates."
Positive consequences	Employee retention	11	"Satisfied employees do not leave."
Positive consequences	Organizational commitment	10	"Relative satisfaction creates a sense of belonging."
Positive consequences	Higher productivity	9	"Committed employees produce more."
Positive consequences	Organizational reputation	8	"A good employer brand enhances reputation."
Negative consequences	Employee turnover (–)	13	"Employees leave due to accumulated hardships."
Negative consequences	Workforce aging (–)	12	"Young people do not enter; the workforce ages."
Negative consequences	Contractor dependency (–)	10	"More contractors mean less organizational attachment."
Negative consequences	Productivity decline (–)	9	"Job insecurity reduces productivity."
Negative consequences	Safety incidents and reputational risk (–)	11	"High risk leads to more accidents."

Table 2 demonstrates how causal, contextual, and intervening conditions interact with organizational strategies to produce both positive and negative consequences. The highest frequencies are observed among causal conditions, particularly job hardship, safety risks, and competitive compensation, indicating that these factors most strongly shape employer brand perception in this sector.

From a causal perspective, compensation, job security, development opportunities, meritocracy, and the inherently hazardous nature of mining work collectively form the core drivers of employer brand perception. While competitive pay and security strengthen positive perceptions, external pressures such as sanctions and commodity price volatility, along with unsafe and demanding working conditions, generate negative perceptions that directly threaten retention and commitment.

Contextual conditions provide the relatively stable backdrop against which employer branding unfolds. Ownership structure, organizational scale and age, geographical remoteness of mines, and the balance between direct employment and contracting define the structural limits and opportunities of employer branding. These factors do not directly create perceptions but strongly condition how causal factors are experienced by employees and job seekers.

Intervening conditions moderate these relationships by amplifying or weakening the effects of causal factors. Intense labor market competition, adverse macro-environmental conditions, and discriminatory organizational practices were frequently cited as forces that disrupt otherwise positive employer branding efforts. Their presence explains why similar compensation or development policies may yield different outcomes across organizations.

Finally, the table clearly links organizational strategies to tangible outcomes. Investments in safety, welfare, human capital development, and fair compensation are associated with positive consequences such as talent attraction, retention, commitment, productivity, and reputation. Conversely, failure to manage employer branding systematically leads to turnover, workforce aging, contractor dependence, productivity losses, and increased safety incidents. Together, these findings provide a coherent, data-saturated conceptual model that captures the dynamic nature of employer branding in Iran's mining industries and confirms the robustness of the extracted framework.

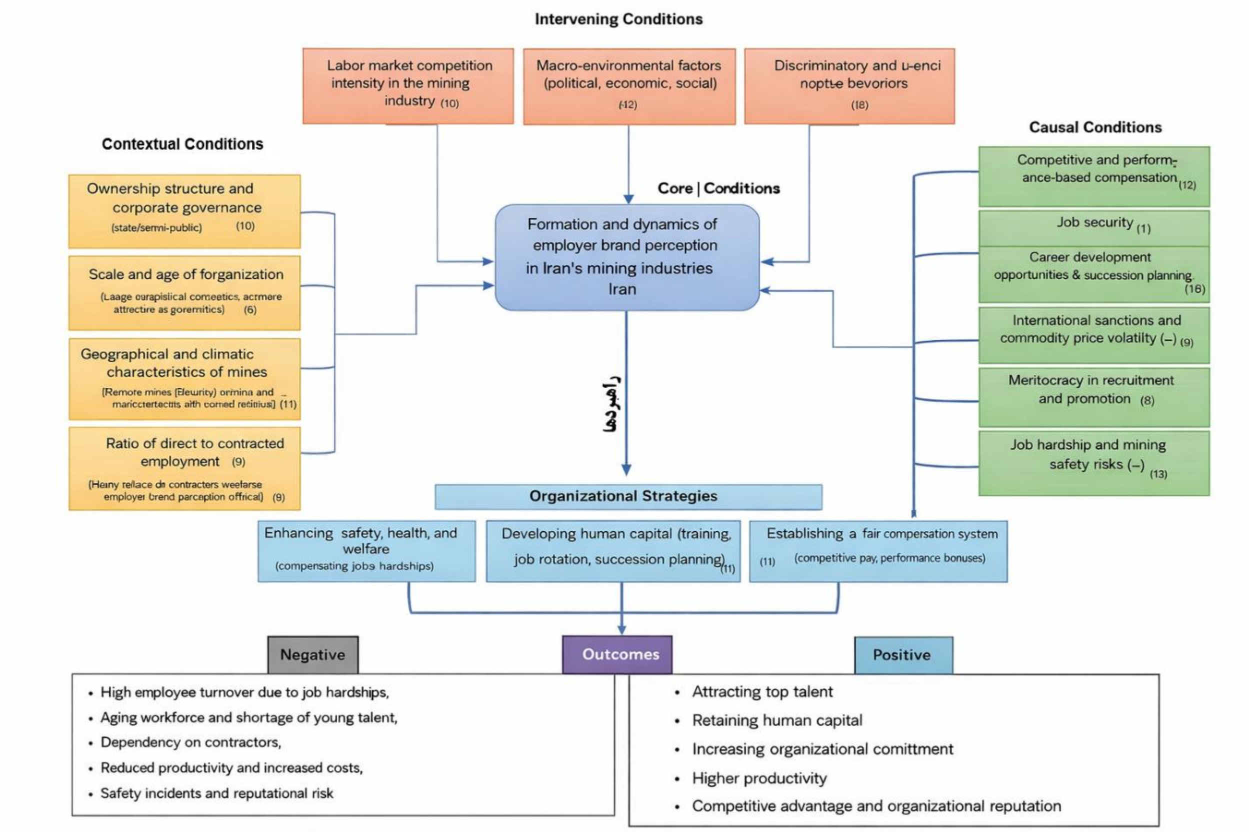

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to design a context-specific employer branding model for Iran's mining industries by identifying the core phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening conditions, organizational strategies, and resulting outcomes. The findings reveal that employer branding in the mining sector is a dynamic and multi-layered phenomenon shaped by the interaction of internal organizational practices and external structural pressures. The extracted model places the "formation and dynamics of employer brand perception" at its center, emphasizing that employees' and job seekers' evaluations of mining organizations are not static but continuously constructed through lived work experiences, managerial practices, and broader environmental signals. This result is consistent with the growing body of literature that conceptualizes employer branding as an ongoing sensemaking process rather than a one-time branding initiative (6, 12).

One of the most salient findings of the study is the dominant role of causal conditions, particularly competitive and performance-based compensation, job security, and job hardship. Among these, job hardship and mining safety risks exhibited the highest frequency, highlighting the unique nature of mining work environments. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing that in physically demanding and high-risk industries, tangible employment conditions carry greater weight in shaping employer brand perceptions than symbolic or image-based messages (13, 22). Competitive compensation emerged as a critical driver of employer brand attractiveness, reinforcing evidence that financial rewards remain a foundational component of the employer value proposition, especially in industries where work conditions are challenging and alternatives are available (1, 15). At the same time, the emphasis on job security reflects the heightened sensitivity of employees in uncertain economic environments, a pattern also observed in emerging economies and sanction-affected contexts (2, 5).

The importance of career development opportunities and succession planning further underscores that employees in mining industries do not perceive their employment solely as transactional. Instead, opportunities for growth, learning, and long-term employability significantly contribute to positive employer brand perceptions. This finding supports earlier studies demonstrating that development-oriented practices strengthen organizational attractiveness and employee commitment, even in traditionally labor-intensive sectors (3, 7). Meritocracy in recruitment and promotion was also identified as a key causal factor, indicating that perceptions of fairness and justice are central to employer branding. This result resonates with research showing that transparent and merit-based systems enhance trust, psychological empowerment, and engagement, thereby reinforcing the employer brand internally (4, 8).

International sanctions and commodity price volatility were identified as negative causal conditions that undermine employer brand stability by generating uncertainty and limiting organizational capacity to sustain attractive employment conditions. This finding highlights the contextual embeddedness of employer branding in macroeconomic and political realities. Prior studies have similarly noted that external shocks and market instability can erode employer brand credibility when organizations are unable to fulfill implicit or explicit employment promises (6, 12). In the Iranian context, this effect appears particularly pronounced, reinforcing the argument that employer branding models developed in stable economies cannot be uncritically transferred to environments characterized by structural volatility (17, 18).

Contextual conditions in the model, including ownership structure, organizational scale and age, geographical and climatic characteristics, and the ratio of direct to contracted employment, form the structural backdrop against which employer branding unfolds. The findings indicate that state-owned or semi-public ownership provides relative employment stability but may also introduce bureaucratic rigidity, affecting employees' perceptions of responsiveness and fairness. This dual effect has been documented in prior Iranian studies, particularly in large public and quasi-public organizations (19, 20). Similarly, the positive role of organizational scale and longevity in enhancing employer brand credibility aligns with research suggesting that established organizations benefit from reputational capital that attracts job seekers, even in less desirable locations (3, 14).

Geographical remoteness and harsh climatic conditions emerged as significant contextual constraints, intensifying recruitment and retention challenges. This finding supports the argument that employer branding in geographically isolated industries must address not only organizational factors but also employees' family, social, and lifestyle concerns (13, 22). The high reliance on contractors was found to weaken organizational attachment and dilute employer brand coherence, echoing earlier studies that link excessive outsourcing to fragmented employment relationships and weaker internal branding (1, 16).

Intervening conditions, including labor market competition intensity, macro-environmental factors, and discriminatory or nepotistic behaviors, were shown to moderate the relationships between causal factors and employer brand perceptions. Intense competition for skilled labor amplifies the importance of employer branding, as organizations must differentiate themselves beyond basic compensation packages. This result aligns with evidence that employer branding becomes more strategic in tight labor markets characterized by skill scarcity (15, 23). Macro-environmental pressures such as inflation and regulatory instability further complicate employer branding efforts, reinforcing findings that external uncertainty heightens employees' focus on security and fairness (5, 6). The identification of discriminatory behaviors as a key intervening factor underscores the fragility of employer branding, as perceptions of injustice can quickly negate positive branding initiatives, a conclusion supported by prior research on employer brand clarity and trust (4, 8).

The organizational strategies identified in the model—enhancing safety, health, and welfare; developing human capital; and establishing fair compensation systems—represent actionable levers through which mining organizations can actively shape employer brand perceptions. The prominence of safety and welfare strategies reflects the symbolic importance of visible investments in employee well-being in high-risk industries. This finding is consistent with value-based employer branding research, which suggests that such practices signal respect, care, and organizational responsibility, thereby strengthening employer brand authenticity (20, 24). Human capital development strategies, including training and job rotation, reinforce the employer brand by communicating long-term commitment to employees, supporting earlier evidence from both industrial and service sectors (7, 10). Fair compensation systems, when perceived as transparent and performance-linked, further consolidate employer brand trust and credibility (2, 15).

The outcomes associated with employer branding in the model provide strong empirical support for its strategic significance. Positive outcomes such as talent attraction, employee retention, organizational commitment, productivity, and reputation align closely with the dominant findings of employer branding literature across contexts (5, 25). Conversely, negative outcomes including high turnover, workforce aging, contractor dependency, productivity decline, and increased safety incidents highlight the tangible costs of weak or inconsistent employer branding. These results corroborate prior studies demonstrating that ineffective employer branding undermines not only human resource outcomes but also operational performance and organizational legitimacy (14, 16).

Importantly, the coexistence of positive and negative outcomes in the model underscores the dynamic nature of employer branding, where improvements in one area can be offset by neglect in another.

Overall, the discussion of findings confirms that employer branding in Iran's mining industries is a complex, context-sensitive phenomenon that cannot be reduced to isolated HR practices or communication campaigns. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of structural conditions, managerial strategies, and employees' lived experiences. The present study extends existing literature by providing an integrated, empirically grounded model that captures these dynamics in a high-risk, capital-intensive industrial context, thereby responding to recent calls for sector-specific and regionally embedded employer branding research (11, 12).

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, the qualitative design and reliance on expert interviews, while appropriate for theory building, limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the Iranian mining context. Second, the study focused primarily on managerial and expert perspectives, which may not fully capture the experiences of frontline workers and contractors. Third, external environmental factors such as sanctions and market volatility were examined perceptually rather than through objective economic indicators, which may influence the interpretation of their effects.

Future research could empirically test the proposed model using quantitative or mixed-method approaches to assess the strength and direction of relationships among its components. Comparative studies across different industrial sectors or countries could further refine the contextual specificity of employer branding models. Additionally, future studies may incorporate the perspectives of frontline employees and contract workers to provide a more inclusive understanding of employer brand formation. Longitudinal research designs would also be valuable in capturing changes in employer branding over time under fluctuating economic and political conditions.

From a practical perspective, managers in mining organizations should view employer branding as an integrated strategic process rather than a standalone HR initiative. Investments in safety, welfare, and fair compensation should be prioritized as visible signals of organizational commitment. Developing clear career paths and transparent promotion systems can strengthen internal trust and retention. Policymakers and industry leaders may also support employer branding by stabilizing regulatory frameworks and encouraging merit-based employment practices. Collectively, these actions can enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of mining organizations by strengthening their employer brand in challenging environments.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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