

Designing an Employee-Based Brand Equity (Human Resources) Model in the Hotel Industry of Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the aim of identifying and analyzing the dimensions and relationships influencing employee-based brand equity in the Iraqi hotel industry. The research adopted a mixed-methods, sequential design comprising qualitative and quantitative phases. In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 experts, including senior managers, human resource specialists, and university faculty members, resulting in the extraction of 37 sub-concepts organized into seven main dimensions: internal organizational branding, brand citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction, organizational culture, employee-based brand equity, brand performance, and organizational performance. Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis with MAXQDA software. In the quantitative phase, data obtained from 200 valid questionnaires were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicated that internal organizational branding had the strongest effect on organizational culture and employee-based brand equity, while employee satisfaction and organizational culture were the most powerful predictors of brand equity. Employee-based brand equity also exerted a direct and significant effect on brand performance and organizational performance. Model fit indices (GOF = 0.704, along with the R² and Q² values of the constructs) demonstrated the model's high explanatory and predictive power. The findings emphasize the importance of investing in internal branding, strengthening organizational culture, and enhancing employee satisfaction and brand citizenship behavior to create brand equity, and they offer significant practical implications for human resource and brand management in Iraqi hotels. The study is subject to limitations such as geographical concentration and a specific sample, and future research is recommended to consider longitudinal and cross-national designs as well as the examination of mediating and moderating variables.

Keywords: employee-based brand equity, internal branding, brand citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction, organizational culture, brand performance, organizational performance, hotel industry, Iraq

Introduction

In contemporary competitive environments, branding has evolved from a customer-facing marketing function into a strategic organizational asset embedded within internal structures, human resource systems, and employee behaviors. Brand equity, traditionally conceptualized from the customer's perspective, is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct that is co-created through interactions between organizations, employees, and external stakeholders. This shift is particularly salient in service-intensive industries such as hospitality, where



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employees act as the primary interface between the brand and customers, shaping perceptions, experiences, and long-term relational outcomes (1, 2). As service encounters are inherently relational and experiential, the alignment between internal brand meaning and employee behavior has become a critical determinant of sustainable brand equity (3).

Within this evolving paradigm, **employee-based brand equity (EBBE)** has emerged as a central theoretical and managerial construct, emphasizing employees' brand knowledge, commitment, identification, and brand-consistent behaviors as key sources of brand value creation (4, 5). Unlike customer-based brand equity models, which primarily focus on awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty, EBBE foregrounds the internal processes through which brands are enacted, communicated, and sustained within organizations (6). Employees are no longer viewed as passive brand carriers but as active brand ambassadors whose attitudes and behaviors directly influence customer experience, satisfaction, and loyalty (7, 8).

The hospitality industry provides a particularly fertile context for examining EBBE due to its high labor intensity, emotional labor demands, and reliance on frontline service delivery. Hotels, especially in emerging and transitional economies, operate in environments characterized by workforce diversity, cultural complexity, and increasing customer expectations for authenticity and service quality (9, 10). In such settings, internal branding, organizational culture, and human resource management practices play a decisive role in shaping employees' psychological connection to the brand and their willingness to deliver brand-consistent service experiences (11, 12).

Recent scholarship has highlighted that internal branding initiatives—such as brand-oriented leadership, internal communication, training, and employer branding—significantly influence EBBE by fostering shared brand understanding and emotional attachment among employees (13, 14). Transformational leadership and brand-oriented management practices further reinforce these effects by embedding brand values into everyday organizational routines and decision-making processes (11, 15). Moreover, organizational culture has been identified as a critical mediating mechanism through which internal branding translates into employee commitment and brand citizenship behaviors (12, 16).

Employee satisfaction and well-being also occupy a central position in EBBE frameworks, as satisfied employees are more likely to internalize brand values, engage in discretionary brand-supportive behaviors, and contribute positively to service performance (17, 18). Empirical evidence suggests that job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, and motivational systems enhance employees' sense of ownership and pride in the brand, thereby strengthening EBBE and its downstream outcomes (19, 20). These findings align with resource-based and stakeholder theories, which posit that human capital and internal relational assets are fundamental sources of competitive advantage and firm performance (21).

Another critical dimension of EBBE is **brand citizenship behavior**, referring to voluntary, extra-role behaviors by employees that support and promote the brand beyond formal job requirements. Such behaviors include brand advocacy, proactive service recovery, creative brand-related suggestions, and peer support, all of which enhance brand credibility and customer trust (6, 22). Studies indicate that brand citizenship behavior serves as a key behavioral manifestation of EBBE and mediates the relationship between internal branding efforts and external brand outcomes (23, 24).

The growing digitalization of branding processes has further amplified the strategic importance of EBBE. In the digital era, employees' online behaviors, social media presence, and interactions with digitally empowered customers can significantly shape brand narratives and reputational capital (25). This dynamic is particularly

relevant for hotels operating in competitive tourism markets, where online reviews, customer-generated content, and digital engagement play a decisive role in brand differentiation and market positioning (26, 27). Consequently, managing EBBE requires an integrated approach that aligns internal branding, digital responsibility, and sustainable practices (28, 29).

From a regional perspective, the Middle East—and Iraq in particular—presents a unique and underexplored context for EBBE research. The Iraqi hospitality and tourism sector has experienced gradual recovery and expansion in recent years, driven by religious tourism, post-conflict reconstruction, and increasing domestic and regional travel (30). However, the industry continues to face significant human resource challenges, including skill shortages, high turnover, limited training infrastructure, and weak internal branding systems (31, 32). These structural constraints underscore the need for context-specific models that account for cultural, institutional, and organizational realities of the Iraqi hotel industry.

Existing studies in Iraq have largely focused on macro-level issues such as tourism development, outsourcing, and general HRM practices, with limited attention to branding from an employee-centered perspective (18, 32). While international research has established robust links between EBBE, customer satisfaction, brand performance, and organizational performance (7, 8), the transferability of these findings to the Iraqi context remains uncertain due to differences in labor markets, cultural norms, and managerial practices. Moreover, most prior EBBE studies have been conducted in developed or rapidly developing tourism markets, leaving a notable empirical gap in post-conflict and emerging economies (33, 34).

Theoretically, the present study is grounded in an integrative perspective that combines internal branding theory, organizational culture frameworks, and brand equity models. Classical brand equity frameworks, such as Aaker's model, emphasize the strategic value of brand-related assets but have been critiqued for insufficiently addressing internal processes and employee roles (35, 36). Contemporary reconceptualizations extend these models by incorporating employee-based antecedents and outcomes, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of brand equity creation in service organizations (1, 14). This integrative approach is particularly relevant for hospitality organizations seeking to align internal capabilities with external brand promises.

Furthermore, emerging research highlights the interdependence between EBBE and customer-based brand equity, suggesting that internal brand strength serves as a foundational driver of customer perceptions and loyalty (5, 37). Studies also demonstrate that EBBE positively influences brand performance indicators such as perceived value, differentiation, and market recognition, as well as organizational performance outcomes including financial results, productivity, and competitive resilience (21, 38). These findings underscore the strategic relevance of developing robust EBBE models tailored to specific industry and cultural contexts.

Despite the growing body of literature, several gaps remain. First, there is a lack of comprehensive, empirically validated models that integrate internal branding, organizational culture, employee satisfaction, and brand citizenship behavior as interconnected drivers of EBBE in the hospitality sector. Second, limited research has examined these relationships in the Iraqi hotel industry, where socio-cultural factors and institutional conditions may shape employee-brand dynamics in distinct ways. Third, few studies have simultaneously assessed the impact of EBBE on both brand performance and organizational performance within a unified structural framework (19, 39). Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing theory and providing actionable insights for hospitality managers operating in complex and resource-constrained environments.

In response to these theoretical and empirical gaps, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach to develop and validate a comprehensive employee-based brand equity model tailored to the Iraqi hotel industry, integrating internal branding, organizational culture, employee satisfaction, brand citizenship behavior, and performance outcomes (6, 33).

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to design and empirically validate an integrated model of employee-based brand equity in the Iraqi hotel industry and to examine its effects on brand performance and organizational performance.

Methods and Materials

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design with a sequential approach, comprising two qualitative and quantitative phases. The qualitative phase was conducted with the aim of identifying and extracting the dimensions and components of employee-based brand equity in the Iraqi hotel industry and was based on semi-structured interviews with experts and senior and middle hotel managers. Data were collected using an inductive and interpretive approach and were coded, categorized, and synthesized into main themes through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the qualitative findings, participant checking, evaluation by non-participating experts, inter-coder review, and the use of an audit trail were employed.

The second, quantitative phase of the study was carried out using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and questionnaire-based data analysis. The data collection instrument was a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire completed by managers, tourism planners, hotel owners, and human resource specialists. The final sample size was determined to be 240 respondents, of which, after quality control, at least 200 valid questionnaires were available for analysis.

Quantitative data analysis was performed using SmartPLS and SPSS software. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was applied to test the relationships among first-order and second-order constructs and to assess the reliability and validity of the model, including composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted, and structural model tests. The second-order model was specified using the repeated indicators approach and a reflective–formative specification. In addition, for descriptive and inferential data analysis, basic statistical indices such as mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values were calculated, and data normality was examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test.

Findings and Results

In the qualitative phase, 14 experts from the Iraqi hotel industry participated in the study. In terms of gender, 64.29% were male and 35.71% were female. The largest age group was 35–45 years (50%), followed by 45 years and above (42.86%). Regarding educational attainment, 57.14% held a bachelor's or master's degree, while 42.86% held a doctoral degree. In terms of professional experience, 57.14% had 10–15 years of work experience, and 42.86% had more than 15 years of professional experience. The organizational composition included managers, deputies, and faculty members, with faculty members accounting for the largest proportion (57.14%). These characteristics indicate diversity, a high level of education, and substantial professional experience within the sample, supporting the extraction of valid concepts in the qualitative analysis.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Qualitative Phase

Demographic Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	9	64.29
	Female	5	35.71
Age	Under 35 years	1	7.14
	35–45 years	7	50.00
	45 years and above	6	42.86
Education	Bachelor's and Master's	8	57.14
	Doctorate	6	42.86
Work Experience	10–15 years	8	57.14
	More than 15 years	6	42.86
Organizational Position	Manager	4	28.57
	Deputy	2	14.29
	Faculty member	8	57.14
Total		14	100%

During the model validation phase, 240 participants took part in the study, demonstrating adequate demographic diversity. In terms of gender, 57.92% were male and 42.08% were female. Regarding age, the highest frequency belonged to the 40–50-year age group (37.08%), followed by the 30–40-year group (28.33%) and the 50 years and above group (24.58%), while the lowest proportion was observed in the under-30 age group (10%). With respect to educational level, 47.50% held a bachelor's degree, 32.92% a master's degree, and 19.58% a doctoral degree. Analysis of work experience indicated that 43.75% had 5–15 years of experience, 41.25% had more than 15 years of experience, and 15% had 5 years of experience or less.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Quantitative Phase (Model Validation)

Demographic Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	139	57.92%
	Female	101	42.08%
Age	Under 30 years	24	10.00%
	30–40 years	68	28.33%
	40–50 years	89	37.08%
	50 years and above	59	24.58%
Education	Bachelor's	114	47.50%
	Master's	79	32.92%
	Doctorate	47	19.58%
Work Experience	5 years or less	36	15.00%
	5–15 years	105	43.75%
	More than 15 years	99	41.25%
Total		240	100%

Initially, in the qualitative phase, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 experts, including senior managers, human resource specialists, brand consultants, and university faculty members, and were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

In the analysis process, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded. The analysis comprised six stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. During the open coding stage, 37 initial concepts were extracted from 486 identifiers, including brand training for employees, internal brand communications, employee commitment and loyalty, job satisfaction, organizational culture, employees' mental image of the brand, and organizational and customer-related outcomes.

Based on code frequencies, the key concepts included internal brand communications, brand training, employee awareness and commitment, and shared organizational values. Other important concepts comprised brand advocacy, satisfaction with rewards and recognition, the organizational brand promise, localization of branding programs, and employees' sense of ownership and perceived value. These results indicate that employees in Iraqi hotels place strong emphasis on aligning their individual and cultural identities with the brand and on the organization's recognition of their role as brand ambassadors. Accordingly, the development of an employee-based brand equity model should take cultural and local components into account.

Table 3. Concepts Derived from Interview Analysis

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency
Organizational Performance	Operational efficiency	11 (51)
	Customer satisfaction	12
	Reduced employee turnover	11
	Employee productivity	9
	Financial performance	8
Brand Performance	Perceived brand value	10 (43)
	Brand differentiation from competitors	12
	Customer brand loyalty	8
	Brand recognition in the market	12
Employee-Based Brand Equity	Trust in brand future and sustainability	10 (90)
	Pride in brand affiliation	15
	Employees' mental image of the brand	14
	Employee commitment to the brand	18
	Employees' brand knowledge	14
	Employees' brand awareness	19
Organizational Culture	Customer-oriented culture	12 (57)
	Behavioral norms	14
	Shared beliefs about the brand	13
	Shared organizational values	18
Employee Satisfaction	Feeling heard and consideration of opinions	13 (71)
	Feeling valued within the organization	14
	Satisfaction with interpersonal relationships	10
	Satisfaction with growth opportunities	9
	Satisfaction with rewards and recognition	16
	Satisfaction with working conditions	9
Brand Citizenship Behavior	Active participation in brand development programs	11 (58)
	Behavior aligned with brand values	12
	Brand advocacy	16
	Creative suggestions for the brand	12
	Voluntary assistance to colleagues	7
Internal Organizational Branding	Creating a sense of brand ownership among employees	14 (116)
	Organizational storytelling	13
	Localization of branding programs	14
	Transfer of brand values	15
	Organizational brand promise	16
	Brand training for employees	20
	Internal brand communications	24
Total		486

Finally, the data-driven model was developed and conceptualized as an employee-based brand equity model for the Iraqi hotel industry and will be presented visually in the final section. This model indicates that success in creating employee-based brand equity requires strengthening organizational culture, increasing job satisfaction, focusing on internal branding, and fostering brand citizenship behaviors, which ultimately lead to improved brand performance and organizational performance.

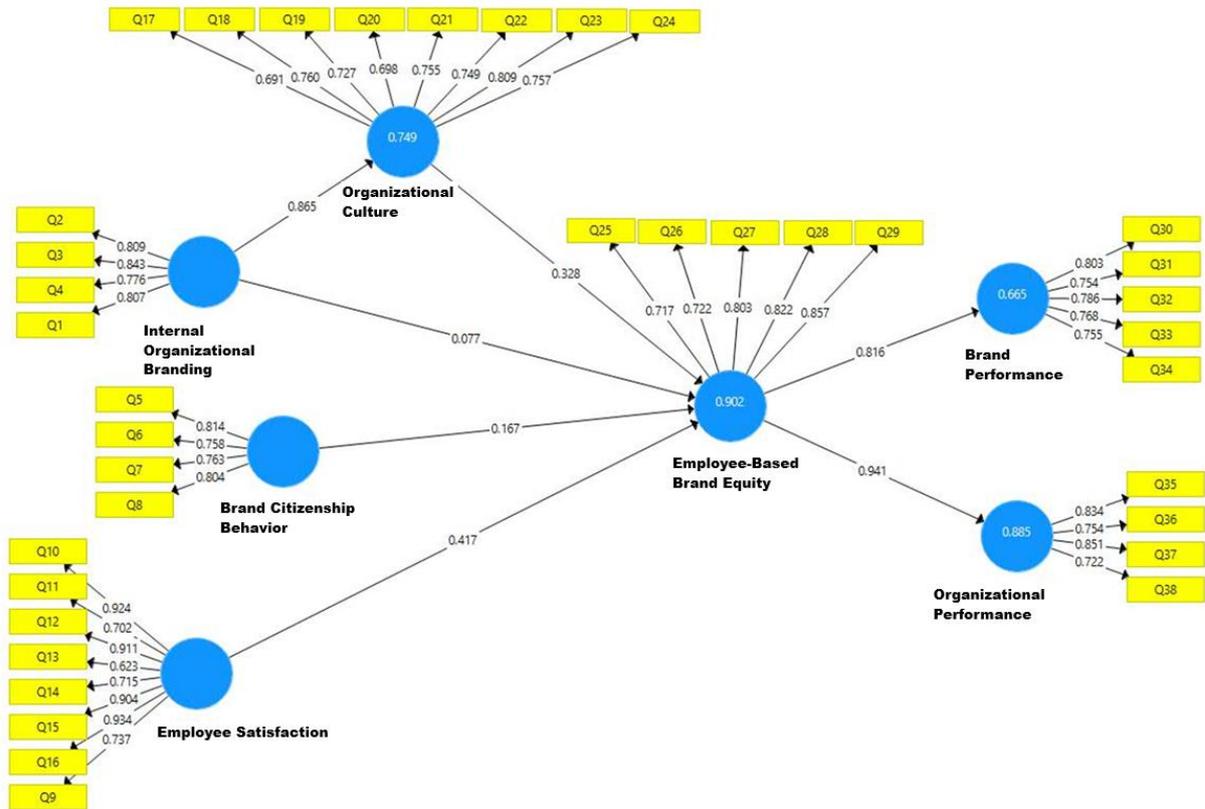


Figure 1. Model Validation Output Using the Partial Least Squares Method

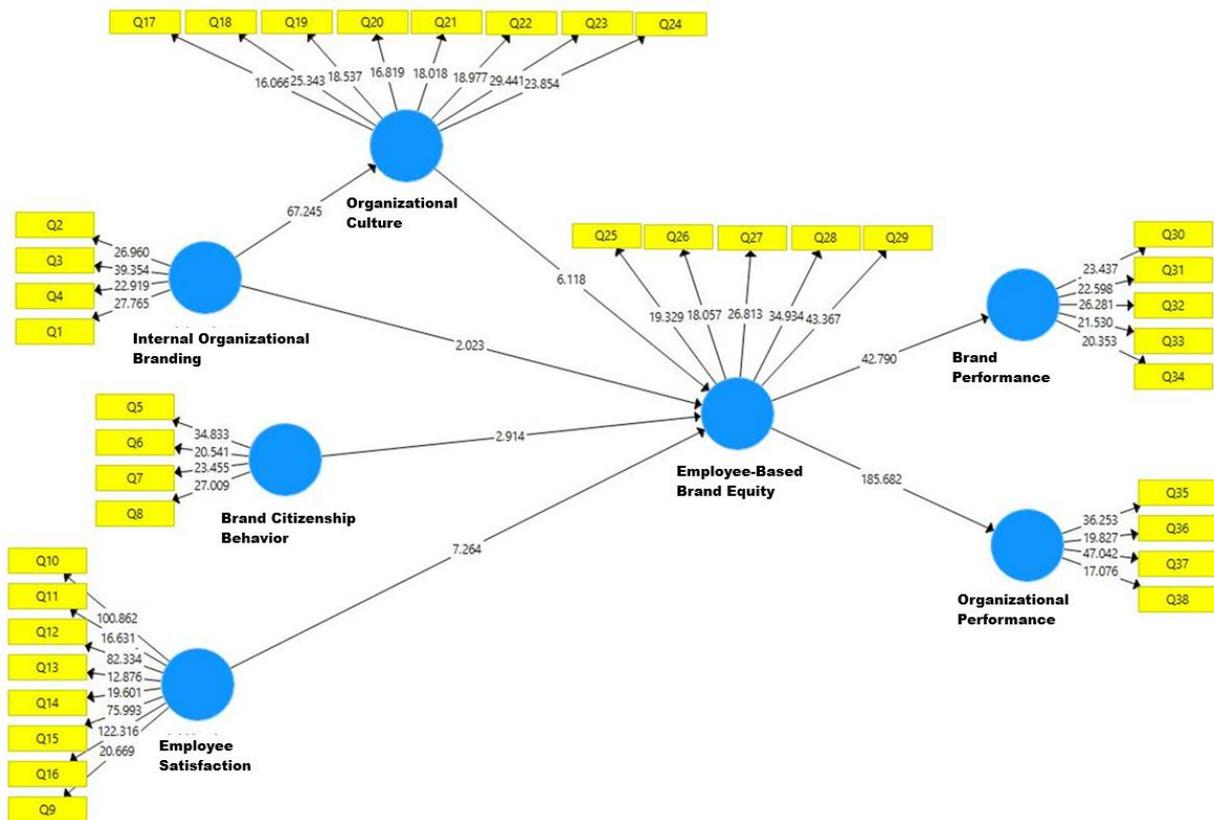


Figure 2. Significance of Relationships Among Variables Based on the Conceptual Model Using the Partial Least Squares Method (Bootstrapping)

Table 4. Results of the Outer Model (Measurement Model)

Main Construct	Item	Factor Loading	t-Value
Internal Branding	Q1	0.807	19.574
	Q2	0.809	19.372
	Q3	0.843	20.337
	Q4	0.776	18.567
Brand Citizenship Behavior	Q5	0.814	23.109
	Q6	0.758	20.334
	Q7	0.763	18.986
	Q8	0.804	19.334
Employee Satisfaction	Q9	0.737	21.774
	Q10	0.924	38.611
	Q11	0.702	15.535
	Q12	0.911	36.542
	Q13	0.623	15.889
	Q14	0.715	20.920
	Q15	0.904	36.438
	Q16	0.934	39.696
Organizational Culture	Q17	0.691	13.825
	Q18	0.760	20.090
	Q19	0.727	18.539
	Q20	0.698	16.130
	Q21	0.755	14.189
	Q22	0.749	16.120
	Q23	0.809	21.260
	Q24	0.757	23.018
EBBE	Q25	0.717	18.544
	Q26	0.722	17.380
	Q27	0.803	24.687
	Q28	0.822	22.571
	Q29	0.857	29.126
Brand Performance	Q30	0.803	13.858
	Q31	0.754	15.914
	Q32	0.786	17.340
	Q33	0.768	17.089
Organizational Performance	Q34	0.755	14.724
	Q35	0.834	22.729
	Q36	0.754	16.657
	Q37	0.851	24.965
	Q38	0.722	20.237

The observed factor loadings were greater than 0.50 and the corresponding t-values exceeded 1.96; therefore, the outer (measurement) model is confirmed.

Table 5. External Validity of the Research Constructs

Variable	AVE	Composite Reliability (CR)	Cronbach's Alpha
Employee-Based Brand Equity	0.618	0.889	0.844
Internal Organizational Branding	0.655	0.883	0.824
Employee Satisfaction	0.663	0.939	0.924
Brand Citizenship Behavior	0.617	0.865	0.793
Brand Performance	0.598	0.882	0.832
Organizational Performance	0.627	0.870	0.802
Organizational Culture	0.554	0.908	0.884

The average variance extracted (AVE) values are greater than 0.50; therefore, convergent validity is established. Cronbach's alpha values for all variables exceed 0.70; therefore, reliability is confirmed.

The composite reliability (CR) values are also greater than the AVE values and exceed the 0.70 threshold in all cases; therefore, the third criterion is also satisfied.

Table 6. Path Analysis Results

Independent Variable	Dependent (or Mediating) Variable	Path Coefficient	t-Statistic	Result
Internal Organizational Branding	Employee-Based Brand Equity	0.077	2.023	Supported
Internal Organizational Branding	Organizational Culture	0.865	67.245	Supported
Brand Citizenship Behavior	Employee-Based Brand Equity	0.167	2.914	Supported
Employee Satisfaction	Employee-Based Brand Equity	0.417	7.264	Supported
Organizational Culture	Employee-Based Brand Equity	0.328	6.118	Supported
Employee-Based Brand Equity	Brand Performance	0.816	42.790	Supported
Employee-Based Brand Equity	Organizational Performance	0.941	185.682	Supported

Table 7. Summary of Structural Model Fit Evaluation Results

Construct	Coefficient of Determination (R ²)	Predictive Relevance (Q ²)	GOF
Organizational Culture	0.749	0.386	0.704
Employee-Based Brand Equity	0.902	0.521	
Brand Performance	0.665	0.371	
Organizational Performance	0.885	0.519	

The results of the model fit and predictive indices within the PLS-SEM framework indicate that the model demonstrates strong explanatory power and high predictive capability. For the organizational culture construct, the R² value is 0.749 and the Q² value is 0.386, indicating strong explanatory power and adequate predictive relevance. Employee-based brand equity, with an R² of 0.902 and a Q² of 0.521, exhibits very strong explanatory power and excellent predictive capability. Brand performance, with an R² of 0.665 and a Q² of 0.371, shows acceptable explanatory and predictive power, while organizational performance, with an R² of 0.885 and a Q² of 0.519, demonstrates very high explanatory and predictive power. At the overall model level, the Goodness of Fit (GOF) index is 0.704, which exceeds the 0.36 criterion and indicates a very strong and excellent overall model fit. Overall, the research model is in a highly satisfactory condition in terms of explaining causal relationships, predictive capability, and overall model fit.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide strong empirical support for the central premise that employee-based brand equity (EBBE) constitutes a pivotal internal mechanism through which hotels can enhance both brand performance and organizational performance. The validated structural model demonstrates that internal organizational branding exerts a significant direct effect on organizational culture and an indirect yet meaningful effect on EBBE, confirming the strategic role of internal branding as a foundational driver of employee-brand alignment. This result is consistent with contemporary branding scholarship that conceptualizes employees as internal brand assets whose understanding of, commitment to, and identification with brand values are cultivated primarily through structured internal branding practices (6, 11). In the context of the Iraqi hotel industry, where formalized branding systems are still developing, the strength of this relationship underscores the importance of deliberate internal communication, brand training, and the articulation of a clear organizational brand promise.

The strong path coefficient observed between internal organizational branding and organizational culture highlights culture as a critical transmission mechanism between managerial intent and employee behavior. This finding aligns with studies emphasizing that branding initiatives are most effective when embedded within shared

norms, values, and behavioral expectations rather than treated as isolated marketing interventions (12, 16). A coherent organizational culture appears to translate abstract brand values into lived employee experiences, thereby reinforcing employees' emotional attachment and trust in the brand. Prior research in hospitality and tourism settings similarly indicates that culture-oriented branding enhances employees' sense of meaning and belonging, which in turn strengthens EBBE (2, 13).

The results further reveal that employee satisfaction and organizational culture are among the strongest predictors of EBBE. This finding is theoretically significant, as it reinforces the view that EBBE is not merely a cognitive construct based on brand knowledge, but also an affective and relational phenomenon grounded in employees' lived experiences within the organization. High levels of job satisfaction, perceived recognition, and fair reward systems appear to foster pride in brand membership and willingness to act in brand-consistent ways. These findings are consistent with prior empirical evidence demonstrating that satisfied employees are more likely to internalize brand values and exhibit brand-supportive behaviors (17, 18, 20). In the Iraqi hospitality context, where HRM challenges such as turnover and skill shortages remain prevalent, the strength of this relationship highlights satisfaction as a strategic lever for internal brand building (31, 32).

Brand citizenship behavior also shows a significant positive effect on EBBE, confirming that discretionary, extra-role behaviors constitute a behavioral manifestation of internalized brand equity. Employees who actively advocate for the brand, assist colleagues, and voluntarily contribute to brand-enhancing activities appear to strengthen the collective brand capital of the organization. This finding corroborates prior studies suggesting that brand citizenship behavior serves as both an outcome of effective internal branding and a reinforcing mechanism that amplifies EBBE over time (22, 23). In service-intensive hotel environments, such behaviors are particularly visible to customers and can significantly influence perceived service quality and brand credibility (7, 8).

One of the most salient findings of this study is the strong and statistically significant effect of EBBE on brand performance. The results indicate that higher levels of employee-based brand equity lead to enhanced perceived brand value, stronger brand differentiation, and improved brand recognition in the market. This supports the growing body of literature that positions EBBE as a precursor to customer-based brand equity by shaping the quality and consistency of service encounters (4, 5). When employees possess deep brand knowledge and emotional attachment, they are better equipped to deliver authentic brand experiences that resonate with customers, thereby strengthening brand performance indicators. This finding is also consistent with research in multinational and luxury hotel contexts, which demonstrates that employee–brand alignment enhances customer experience and brand engagement (7, 38).

The exceptionally strong relationship between EBBE and organizational performance observed in this study further underscores the strategic value of internal brand equity. The results suggest that EBBE contributes not only to market-facing outcomes but also to broader organizational metrics such as productivity, operational efficiency, and financial performance. This aligns with the resource-based view of the firm, which conceptualizes human capital and relational assets as sources of sustained competitive advantage (21). In the Iraqi hotel industry, where external market conditions and infrastructural constraints may limit strategic options, leveraging EBBE as an internal resource offers a viable pathway to organizational resilience and performance improvement (9, 30).

The overall explanatory and predictive power of the model, as evidenced by high R^2 , Q^2 , and GOF values, indicates that the integrated framework proposed in this study captures the core dynamics of EBBE formation and outcomes in the hospitality context. These results extend prior EBBE research by empirically validating a

comprehensive, multi-construct model that simultaneously incorporates internal branding, organizational culture, employee satisfaction, brand citizenship behavior, and performance outcomes. While previous studies have often examined these relationships in isolation, the present findings demonstrate their interdependence within a unified structural framework (14, 33). This integrative perspective is particularly valuable for emerging hospitality markets, where managerial resources must be allocated strategically to achieve maximum impact.

From a contextual standpoint, the findings contribute to the limited but growing literature on branding and human resource management in Iraq and similar post-conflict or transitional economies. The results suggest that, despite structural challenges, Iraqi hotels can effectively build brand equity by focusing on internal processes and employee experiences rather than relying solely on external marketing efforts. This observation resonates with international research emphasizing that strong internal brand foundations are especially critical in environments characterized by uncertainty and institutional constraints (3, 25). By demonstrating the robustness of EBBE mechanisms in the Iraqi context, the study enhances the external validity of EBBE theory and supports its applicability across diverse cultural and economic settings.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is cross-sectional in nature, which limits the ability to draw definitive causal inferences regarding the dynamic relationships among internal branding, EBBE, and performance outcomes. Second, the empirical data were collected from a specific segment of the Iraqi hotel industry, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other service sectors or national contexts. Third, the reliance on self-reported questionnaire data introduces the possibility of common method bias and social desirability effects, despite procedural efforts to mitigate these risks.

Future research could build on the present findings by adopting longitudinal designs to examine how EBBE evolves over time and how changes in internal branding or HRM practices influence long-term brand and organizational outcomes. Comparative or cross-national studies would also be valuable in assessing the cultural contingencies of EBBE mechanisms, particularly by contrasting emerging economies with more mature hospitality markets. Additionally, future studies could explore the moderating or mediating roles of variables such as leadership style, digital branding practices, or employee psychological capital to further refine the theoretical model.

From a practical perspective, hotel managers should prioritize internal branding as a strategic investment rather than a peripheral communication activity, ensuring that brand values are consistently communicated, enacted, and reinforced through training and leadership behavior. Strengthening organizational culture and employee satisfaction should be treated as core branding objectives, as these factors directly shape employees' emotional attachment to the brand. Managers are also encouraged to foster brand citizenship behaviors by creating supportive environments that recognize initiative, encourage collaboration, and empower employees as authentic brand ambassadors, thereby translating internal brand strength into superior brand and organizational performance.

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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 adhered 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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