

Internal Capabilities and Brand Performance: Examining Employee Brand Engagement in an Emerging Market Fashion Brand

Shafquat Hussain

PhD Scholar & Lecturer

Department of Business Administration, Ilma University Pakistan

Shafquathussain73@gmail.com

Dr.Irfan Ul Haque

Assistant Professor (Corresponding Author)

Department of Business Administration, Ilma University Pakistan

Dr.irfan@ilmauniversity.edu.pk

irfan3323@gmail.com

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Abstract

The competing heritage fashion brands operating in developing urban environments are characterized by a high degree of competitive rivalry, unstable economic environments, and shifting demands in the marketplace. Although these fashion brands possess a strong brand position in their respective cultures, there is a scarcity of empirical evidence related to the role of internal organizational processes in influencing brand performance. The study examines how the mediating role of employee brand engagement affects brand performance in relation to strategic human resource management practices, market orientation, and leadership support for brand performance. The quantitative approach was adopted in conducting this study, which collected data from a sample of 390 employees of a prominent heritage fashion brand operating in Karachi, a developing urban area in Pakistan. Employing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling techniques using Smart PLS 4.0 software analysis tools, it was found in this study that a highly positive mediating role of employee brand engagement affects brand performance in relation to market orientation and strategic human resource management practices. The results of this study also confirmed leadership support as a significant brand performance mediation moderation variable in relation to employee brand engagement mediation of brand performance. The results also confirmed that leadership support did not influence brand performance as a direct antecedent in relation to brand performance mediation by employee brand engagement in heritage fashion brands operating in a developing urban area like Karachi in Pakistan. The results of this study also confirmed that a vital role is played by employee brand engagement as a brand performance builder in heritage fashion brands operating in a developing urban area like Karachi in Pakistan. The results of this study also confirmed a recommendation related to strategic management practices in heritage fashion brands operating in a developing urban area like Karachi in Pakistan in relation to building brand performance by influencing human resource management practices and market orientation in a manner consistent with supportive actions of leadership in heritage fashion brands operating in a developing urban area like Karachi in Pakistan.

Keywords: Employee Brand Engagement; Brand Performance; Strategic HRM; Market Orientation.

INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry remains an important aspect of the economy, with the global apparel market in 2025 being valued at about USD 1.84 trillion, with this figure expected to grow to USD 2.6 trillion in 2035, with steady growth dynamics in the global market, including the developed and the emerging markets (Uniform Market, 2025; Future Market Insights, 2025). The Asia-Pacific market contributed over 40% of the global revenue in the market in 2024, with the importance of the emerging markets in the global fashion industry being evident, with the influence of digital consumption channels also being prominent in the market (Grand View Research, 2024; Uniform Market, 2025). In addition, the study of the fashion market has shown that the influence of digitalization and personalization in the experience of the consumer in the market, with sustainable fashion being an important aspect of the growth of the market in the future (Future Market Insights, 2025).

Regional fashion growth trends are seen in South Asian markets, where increasing per capita income and e-commerce growth are increasing demand for fashionable clothing. In Pakistan, e-commerce sales in the clothing sector are forecasted to be over USD 1.05 billion by 2025, driven by increasing e-commerce adoption and a wider presence in e-commerce platforms (ECDB, 2025; Statista, 2025). National forecasts indicate a large increase in revenues related to fashion in Pakistan, indicating a rising interest in fashionable and traditional clothing categories (Statista, 2025; Asghar et al., 2024). The literature in this area shows that a significant relationship between customer engagement and purchase intention and trust in a brand is a significant determinant of behavioral responses in the clothing market (Aziz et al., 2025; Aziz & Ahmed, 2023). Other literature in Pakistan also shows that engagement and factors such as trust and identification with a brand have been found essential in influencing clothing market purchase behavior (Aziz et al., 2025; Aziz & Ahmed, 2023).

In the highly competitive fashion market in urban settings like Karachi, these cities become hubs for local as well as global fashion brands vying for the interest of the consumer. Heritage fashion brands like Khaadi represent the amalgamation of cultural style and the latest fashion trends in the market, with widespread retail presence in the major Pakistani cities (Statista, 2025; Asghar et al., 2024). However, these brands face challenges in the form of market volatility, increased market competition, and shifting consumer expectations in the market, which can result in the decline of traditional brand performance drivers like brand loyalty if the engagement strategies are not effectively deployed in the market. It has been supported by previous literature that brand engagement, aided by the concept of trust and consumer identification in the market, not only improves the intentions of the consumer but also plays an important part in improving the long-term performance of the brand in the emerging market settings (Aziz et al., 2025; Aziz & Ahmed, 2023). Therefore, the study of the impact of brand engagement on brand performance in the market for heritage fashion brands like Khaadi in the city of Karachi offers a rich addition to the literature related to brand management in emerging economies.

Problem Statement

The urban retail fashion industry of Pakistan is becoming increasingly competitive, and this is creating challenges for domestic heritage brands such as Khaadi to maintain their superior brand performance. Within an urban setting such as Karachi, increasing competition from foreign brands and new entrants from Pakistan has made brand engagement an increasingly important tool of brand differentiation and value creation. While Khaadi enjoys strong cultural brand associations,

existing research indicates that established clothing brands operating within developing countries often witness a degradation of brand awareness and brand associations, which negatively impacts brand loyalty and repeat purchasing (Bilalli Abduraimi et al., 2023; Rais et al., 2023). This is further worsened by macroeconomic instability within Pakistan, with pressures of inflation and a reduction in consumer purchasing power, resulting in greater brand switching (Rehman et al., 2023).

In spite of the rising literature on the subject of the importance of branding within the emerging markets, the current literature is still sparse on the subject of the contributions of the engagement mechanism for the performance of heritage brands within the context of economic uncertainty (Ahmed & Abedin, 2022). In that sense, the current study fills the important void within the literature and aims to investigate the contributions of the engagement mechanism for the performance of Khaadi within the context of the Karachi market.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the impact of brand engagement on brand performance in respect to the brand "Khaadi" operating in the urban fashion retail market of Karachi?

RQ2: What is the relationship between brand engagement and consumer behavioral outcomes such as purchase intention and loyalty in the context of Khaadi?

RQ3: What is the role of digital and experiential engagement strategies for brands in improving Khaadi's performance during uncertain economic times?

RQ4: How strongly brand engagement mediates the relationship between brand communication strategies and brand performance in the case of Khaadi?

Research Objectives

RO1: To investigate the impact of brand engagement on brand performance of Khaadi in the retail market of Karachi.

RO2: To examine how brand engagement is associated with consumer behavioral outcomes such as purchase intention and brand loyalty.

RO3: To assess how digital and experiential engagement approaches might be used to improve Khaadi's brand performance.

RO4: To examine the mediating effect of brand engagement between brand communication strategies and brand performance of Khaadi.

Rationale of the study

Brand performance and consumer engagement are core constructs in modern branding research, yet there has been sparse empirical work examining their interrelationship in emerging economies for heritage fashion brands. Current branding studies have largely focused on developed economies, without considering emerging challenges in emerging economies, including economic fluctuations, price sensitivity, and rapidly changing consumer behaviors. Karachi, being the foremost market in Pakistan, represents an important setting for this study, given the cutthroat competition among local and foreign fashion brands, rapid digitalization, and varied consumer segments. The study of Khaadi represents an important extension of brand engagement theory, particularly in an emerging economy setting, to fill an important void in branding research, including branding in emerging economies, by shedding important insights on consumer loyalty, purchase intention, and overall brand performance for heritage fashion brands in emerging economies.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the empirical understanding of the role of brand engagement in the performance of heritage fashion brands in the context of the emerging market. Through the study of the city of Karachi, it outlines the techniques of enhancing consumer loyalty, purchase intentions, and competitive superiority in the cultural context. The study contributes to the theories of brand engagement by integrating the technological, cultural, and economic perspectives, which affect the behaviors of the consumers. The study is applicable and can be used by the fashion retail organizations in the creation of the engagement initiatives, which can help in the development of the market and sustainable consumer associations.

Scope of the Study

This research will be restricted to heritage fashion brands that function within the urban markets of Pakistan. The research will specifically target Karachi as it is the most established and competitive fashion market. The research will analyze brand engagement and brand performance with regards to consumer loyalty, purchasing intentions, and brand trust. The research will include offline as well as online purchasing channels. The research will specifically target Khaadi as a brand but will provide information that is relevant to other heritage fashion brands that function within established markets. The research will specifically exclude international markets as well as other non-heritage fashion markets. The research will specifically be restricted to consumer perceptions and will not include any brand processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

H1: Employee Brand Engagement Positively Influences Brand Performance

Employee brand engagement (EBE) is a strategic tool that helps organizations convert human capital into performance outcomes. Employee brand engagement is the extent to which employees embrace the values of the brand and help spread the brand in their day-to-day jobs, which aligns their actions with the goals of the company. Employees who are brand-engaged tend to have high levels of enthusiasm, motivation, and commitment and act as internal ambassadors for the company, which helps the company's brand, productivity, and services (Van Nguyen et al., 2021; Yousf & Khurshid, 2021). Employee brand engagement is linked to performance outcomes such as the exchange of knowledge, job involvement, and proactive problem solving. Organizations that have high levels of employee brand engagement are more efficient, innovative, and responsive compared to competitors (Arshad & Ming, 2024) and have a positive culture that leads to low employee turnover and stable employee skills (Ahmed et al., 2023). Employee brand engagement has been identified as an important precursor for achieving long-term organizational performance through systematic reviews (Vijayabanu et al., 2025).

H2: Leadership Support Positively Influences Brand Performance

Leadership support is an important organizational factor that boosts employee motivation, engagement, and performance, thus improving overall brand performance. Supportive leadership approaches such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, and participative leadership promote trust, empowerment, and employee involvement, which are key stimulators of employee performance (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Eva et al., 2019). Transformational leadership,

in this case, acts as an attractive vision that encourages employee participation, thus improving employee alignment with organizational goals and overall work engagement (Breevaart et al., 2014; Ghadi, Fernando, & Caputi, 2013). Leadership support also promotes psychological empowerment and discretionary behavior, thus having an overall positive impact on individual and organizational performance (Spreitzer, 1995; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). There has also been empirical evidence in both public and private sectors confirming that employee engagement acts as an important mediator in leadership support and performance-outcome associations (Saks, 2006; Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Authentic leadership also improves trust, ethical climate, and employee positive attitudes, which are imperative in improving overall employee performance and behavior (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Leroy et al., 2015).

H3: Market Orientation has a Positive Influence on Brand Performance

Market Orientation (MO) can be defined as the organizational culture and processes that focus on the systematic development, dissemination, and response to market intelligence in order to attain superior market value and sustainable competitive advantages (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990). Organizations with strong market orientation capabilities can easily build products and services according to customer demands, thus improving brand performance, customer satisfaction, and market standing (Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005; Hult et al., 2005). Market Orientation promotes organizational coordination, knowledge development, and market response, allowing the entire organizational workforce to coordinate their activities with brand and market plans (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Day, 1994). Market Orientation also enhances employee engagement with the organizational mission, clarifying the importance of their contributions in customer value creation, thus having an indirect effect on employee performance (Saks, 2006; Gruman & Saks, 2011). Abundant amounts of empirical research in different industries establish the positive association of market orientation with financial, innovative, brand, and customer performance, with organizational and employee-related mediating variables (Kirca et al., 2005; Lings & Greenley, 2010; Hult et al., 2005).

H4: Strategic Human Resource Management Practices Positively Influence Brand Performance

This hypothesis states that Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) is a process that aims at aligning HR practices with organizational strategies with a view to improve HR capabilities and performance. SHRM incorporates major HR functions such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, compensation, and employee participation, and aligns them with a strategic plan that aims at developing skills and motivation and creating commitment. Research studies have found that SHRM is positively related to employee work engagement and performance, and that work engagement is a mediator between HRM and performance (Ali, Kamran, Ali, & Zulfiqar Ali, 2022; Sustainable human resource management and employees' performance, 2023). Specifically, it has been found that when employees perceive that HR practices at workplaces are effective, it boosts their engagement, and consequently, performance is increased (Sustainable human resource management and employees' performance, 2023; Ali et al., 2022). Furthermore, effective SHRM boosts various employee attitudes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and these constitute antecedents of organizational effectiveness (Strategic Human Resource Management and Employee Outcomes, 2025).

H5: Market Orientation Has a Positive Impact on Employee Brand Engagement

Market Orientation (MO) represents a management ideology and approach that focuses on market-related knowledge and response to customers, competitors, and market trends. Apart from its performance outcome, market orientation has a positive impact on employee-related processes, especially employee brand engagement (EBE). Employees of market-oriented companies feel that they are involved in activities that make a difference to the organization and thus increase cognitive and affective commitment to the brand (Narver & Slater, 1990; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). By integrating market knowledge with organizational processes, companies can increase employee engagement with brands and organizational strategies (Narver, Slater, & MacLachlan, 2004). Empirical research shows that employee exposure to customer-driven strategies and market-oriented communications can increase employee behaviors and performance that are consistent with brands (Lings & Greenley, 2005). Additionally, market orientation can increase transparency, collaboration, and information sharing among employees, thus increasing employee commitment to organizational identity and involvement with organizational brands (Appiah-Adu, 1998). On the other hand, employee engagement acts as a mediator between market orientation and performance, thus explaining how market-oriented strategic management can be converted into employee-driven value-creation (Kumar et al., 2011; Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005). Findings based on empirical research in services and manufacturing organizations confirm that increased market orientation can increase employee motivations, engagement, and employee branding, along with market-oriented performance (Boso, Story, & Cadogan, 2013).

H6: Strategic Human Resource Management Practices Positively Influence Employee Brand Engagement

Employee brand engagement is an Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices have been important for influencing employees' attitudes and behaviors, and more specifically, for promoting work engagement and performance. SHRM integrates HR practices, such as selection and recruitment, training and development, performance management, compensation, and employee involvement, with strategic plans for better workforce capability and performance (Hossain, Arefin, & Urme, 2025). Studies have shown that perceived positive HRM practices have been positively related to work engagement among employees, suggesting that positive HR practices have been important for promoting work engagement and positive performance outcomes (Shahbaz Sharif et al., 2024). More specifically, research suggests that when employees have positive perceptions of HRM practices, they display higher levels of work engagement, and this work engagement is positively related to positive performance behaviors. Research also suggests that strategic HRM practices have been important for promoting positive employee attitudes, including job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which have been important for positive performance outcomes (Hossain et al., 2025; Shahbaz Sharif et al., 2024).

H7: Leadership Support and Employee Brand Engagement Interaction on Brand Performance

Leadership support is an important factor in influencing employee motivation, engagement, and performance, where leadership support effectiveness in improving brand performance is dependent on employee brand engagement (Wang, Wang, & Wang, 2022; Fadhillah, Heriyadi, Daud, Shalahuddin, & Fahrana, 2023). Transformational and authentic leadership behaviors, including inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and participative decision-making, are most

effective in a highly engaged workplace, where engaged employees are most receptive to leadership support and suggestions, along with being most capable of turning organizational strategy into concrete outcomes (Wang et al., 2022; Ndjoonduezu, 2024). Research literature has found that if leadership support is strong, combined with the presence of a strongly engaged workforce, there is considerable enhancement of discretionary effort, job involvement, and organizational alignment, which leads to the overall enhancement of organizational performance (Fadhilah et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). But if the situation is such that the level of employee engagement is moderately low, the effectiveness of leadership support in enhancing organizational performance is reduced, thereby underlining the fact that employee engagement plays an important moderating role in enhancing organizational performance through leadership support (Ndjoonduezu, 2024). Additionally, leadership support, combined with employee engagement, leads to the enhancement of psychological empowerment, knowledge-sharing, and proactivity, which ultimately leads to the overall enhancement of organizational innovation and performance (Wang et al., 2022; Fadhilah et al., 2023).

H8: Market Orientation as an Antecedent That Directly Influences Brand Performance via Employee

Market orientation (MO), an organizational approach to gathering, sharing, and acting on customer, competitor, and market trend information, improves organizational responsiveness and competitiveness (Narver & Slater, 1990; Kohli & Jaworski, 1993). In addition to its relationship to brands directly, MO affects internal organizational processes, such as employee engagement with brands and service roles, and research reveals that internal dimensions of market orientation are found to increase organizational members' engagement with organizational goals and their enactment of brand behaviors (Lings & Greenley, 2005; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Research also reveals that internal processes for market orientation, such as information sharing and interfunctional coordination, enhance organizational members' understanding of customer value and role clarity, resulting in increased motivation and performance contributions to organizational outcomes (Li & Ko, 2021; Odoom & Mensah, 2018), reflecting factors aligned with employee engagement theory. Research also clearly demonstrates that market orientation cultures have a positive effect on performance results, improving innovation and service performance through employee behaviors aligned by a common organizational orientation (Gul et al., 2021; Narver, Slater, & MacLachlan, 2004). Market orientation improves internal engagement and helps brands by aligning customer-centric values to organizational members' attitudes and behaviors.

H9: Strategic Human Resource Management Practices Impact Brand Performance via Employee Brand Engagement

The brand performance of an organization is significantly dependent Practices of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) play a vital role in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of employees, especially in terms of employee engagement and performance. SHRM integrates HRM policies related to employee recruitment and selection, training and development activities, performance management systems, compensation programs, and employee involvement activities to enhance the capabilities of the workforce and organizational performance (Hina, Siraj, & Yasmeen, 2025). Research work has indicated the positive relationship of perceptions regarding supportive HRM practices with employee work engagement, suggesting the positive impact of good HRM practices on employee engagement and their positive performance outcomes (Sypniewska, Baran, & Kłos, 2023; Urbini, Chirumbolo, Giorgi, Caracuzzo, & Callea, 2021). It

was observed in the study that employees' perceptions regarding the relevance and good execution of HRM practices result in increased employee engagement, which in turn correlates with good performance behaviors (Sypniewska, Baran, & Kłos, 2023; Urbini et al., 2021). The importance of SHRM was also indicated in the study by emphasizing the enhancement of employee attitudes like job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which serve as important precursors for good performance improvements (Hina et al., 2025; Sypniewska et al., 2023).

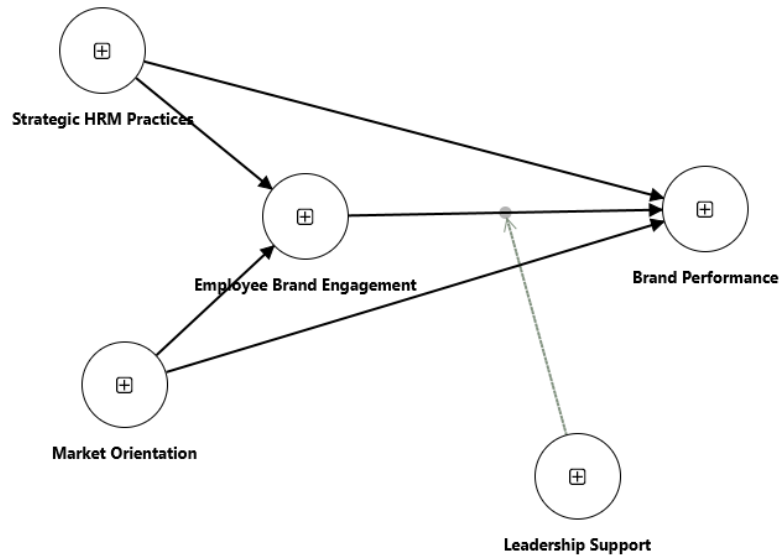
Theoretical Framework

The current study employs the theory of Resource-Based View (RBV), which postulates that sustained competitive advantage in firms results from their capacity to identify and leverage VRIN resources and capabilities that possess attributes of value, rarity, imitability, and non-substitution by competitors (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). The RBV theory proposes that firms derive their performance primarily through their internal resources, specifically intangible resources like brand equity, employees' capabilities, and consumer-related competencies, which generate a long-term competitive advantage for firms (Barney, 1991; Priem & Butler, 2001). The RBV theory has been extensively employed in marketing and brand management literature to examine the strategic role of brand engagement practices and relational capabilities as a source of brand equity, customer loyalty, and brand performance (Centobelli et al., 2022). The strategic employment of internal resources by firms generates a competitive advantage and helps firms differentiate themselves in a competitive market and gain superior long-term performance (Wernerfelt, 1984; Sipos et al., 2025). The RBV theory has a robust theoretical foundation for exploring the strategic role of employees and brand engagement resources in brand performance and competitive advantage in emerging fashion retail markets.

Conceptual Framework.

In this research, brand engagement becomes the independent variable, with brand performance being considered the dependent variable, and brand trust and consumer loyalty being viewed as mediating variables. From the perspective of RBV, it can be conceptualized that heritage fashion brands, including Khaadi, make use of their internal distinctive resources, namely brand, digital engagement, and brand assets related to cultural factors, to increase consumer interaction and brand engagement (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). The conceptual framework indicates that the utilization of consumer interaction and brand engagement has a positive impact on brand performance, including purchase intention, actual buying, and brand equity. In addition, it indicates that consumer trust and brand loyalty mediate the impact of brand engagement on brand performance, emphasizing the crucial role of relational and psychological capital in achieving brand performance in the marketplace (Aziz et al., 2025; Centobelli et al., 2022).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

For this study, a quantitative research design was adopted that made use of a cross-sectional study design. The reason for adopting a quantitative study was that it can be used to establish relationships between variables and for hypothesis testing and validation through statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hair et al., 2022). The cross-sectional study design was adopted for this study because it allows for the examination of variables at a point in time and can be used to establish relationships between SHRM practices and other variables such as employee engagement and brand performance at a point in time (Saunders et al., 2019; Sekaran & Bougie, 2021). The study design can be considered very effective and can be easily applied in emerging markets for organizational behavior and marketing studies because it saves time and allows for generalization (Iqbal et al., 2023; Avolio et al., 2009).

Population and Study Setting

The target audience included employees working in FMCG companies in Karachi, Pakistan. Karachi, being the largest industrial and financial center in the country, has many FMCG companies in the food, beverages, personal care, and home care segments. The urban economy, varied consumer markets, and available industrial infrastructure make Karachi an apt environment to study the performance of the brand affected by organizational internal variables (Farid et al., 2024; Rehman & Ahmed, 2024). The target population included 390 employees working in the middle to senior levels of the HR, marketing, and operations functions in the respective organizations, responsible for organizational decisions influencing brand performance (Iqbal et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2025).

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

This study used purposive sampling to make sure that all respondents have adequate knowledge of HR, marketing, or operation practices relevant to brand performance. In fact, purposive sampling works best when researchers have particular groups in mind to target in their study, as suggested by Etikan et al. (2016) and Palinkas et al. (2015). A total of 390 questionnaires were distributed and collected, representing the whole population that can be reached, thus reducing the error that can be caused by sampling in a non-representative manner (Hair et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2019). The whole population method of data collection provides a strong base for structural equation modeling and enhances the possibility of generalization of findings in the FMCG industry of Karachi.

Measurement Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used for measuring the variables. All items were taken from standardized scales. A five-point Likert scale was used for measuring all items. The scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Table No. 1 Measurement Instrument

Construct	Source	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Strategic HRM Practices (SHRM)	Ahmad et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2001	5	0.89
Employee Engagement	Saks, 2006; Alfes et al., 2013	5	0.87
Leadership Support	Avolio et al., 2009; Sahoo & Mohapatra, 2022	5	0.85
Market Orientation	Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990	5	0.88
Brand Performance	Raza et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2024	5	0.90

Data Collection Procedure

The date of collecting data was six weeks (September to October 2025). Online questionnaires were given to respondents in consideration of accessibility. Participants were informed about the aim of conducting this research before carrying out the questionnaires. Consent was obtained from each participant. Attempts were made by following up in order to attain maximum response rate regarding completed questionnaires (Bryman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0, which is appropriate when there are mediating and moderating factors and when analyzing emerging markets with moderate sample sizes (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2016). Five steps were followed: (1) calculation of descriptive statistics to provide an overview of demographic data and distribution of constructs; (2) analysis of internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability; (3) analysis of validity with convergent validity using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity using Fornell-Larcker criteria

(Fornell and Larcker, 1981); (4) hypothesis testing with bootstrapping with 5,000 samples to determine path coefficients, t-values, and significance; and (5) mediation analysis to investigate employee brand engagement as a mediator between strategic HRM practices, leadership support, market orientation, and brand performance (Preacher and Hayes, 2008; Sarstedt et al., 2021). PLS-SEM can handle both reflectively and formatively defined constructs and is often used when analyzing HRM and marketing research in emerging markets because of its ability to handle complex relationships effectively (Henseler et al., 2016; Sarstedt et al., 2021).

Ethical Consideration

In this study, ethical standards were strictly adhered to. Informed consent was sought from the participants, and they were made aware of the fact that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time (Bryman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). The participants' answers were anonymized and safely stored to promote their confidentiality. This study obtained ethical clearance from the research ethics committee of the university, thus adhering to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. Resnik, 2018).

FINDINGS

Demographic Analysis

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 390)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	210	53.8
	Female	180	46.2
Age (Years)	18–24	75	19.2
	25–34	160	41.0
	35–44	95	24.4
	45+	60	15.4
Education Level	Bachelor's	220	56.4
	Master's	140	35.9
	Others	30	7.7
Department	HR	80	20.5
	Marketing	150	38.5
	Operations	100	25.6

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	Others	60	15.4
Work Experience	<1 year	30	7.7
	1–3 years	110	28.2
	4–6 years	130	33.3
	7+ years	120	30.8
Job Level	Junior	140	35.9
	Mid-level	180	46.2
	Senior	70	17.9

The demographic information of the 390 respondents is shown in Table 2. It is important to analyze respondent attributes in order to situate findings, because age, gender, education, organizational affiliation, work experience, and level of work can all impact attitudes towards organizational practices, employee engagement, or brand performance (Alfes et al., 2013; Saks, 2006).

It has a fairly balanced representation of both genders, with 210 male participants (53.8%) and 180 female participants (46.2%). Literature shows that gender diversity affects employee engagement, organizational commitment, and decision-making processes, which in turn affect performance outcomes (Ng & Burke, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007). The dominant age group consists of participants aged 25-34 years (41.0%), followed by 35-44 years (24.4%), 18-24 years (19.2%), and 45 years and older (15.4%). Age gaps have been shown to affect work values, job satisfaction, and attitudes towards strategic HRM and leadership approaches (Ng & Feldman, 2010; Kooij et al., 2011).

Regarding education, a bachelor's degree was most common (56.4%), followed by a master's degree (35.9%), and other (7.7%). Higher levels of education are related to higher levels of skill, absorptive capacity, and organizational initiative (Jiang et al., 2012; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). To capture functional diversity, respondents were categorized by their functional departments: marketing (38.5%), operations (25.6%), human resources (20.5%), and other (15.4%). Functional departments determine an individual's or organization's involvement with leadership, market-oriented, and brand-related issues (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990).

Concerning work experience, 33.3% have 4-6 years of work experience, followed by more than 7 years (30.8%), 1-3 years (28.2%), and less than 1 year (7.7%). More work experience leads to more knowledge and mastery in an organization and involvement in strategic initiatives (Ng & Feldman, 2009; Hall & Torrington, 1998). Finally, the sample consists of junior-level workers (35.9%), mid-level workers (46.2%), and senior-level workers (17.9%), which reflects different levels of decision-making and involvement in strategic and brand-related matters (Avolio et al., 2009; Judge et al., 2010). Taken together, the demographic characteristics represent a very representative cross-section of the employees who are part of the leadership processes, the strategic HRM practices, market orientation, as well as the brand-related activities. The diversity in the demographic characteristics improves the validity of the findings in the study because it is robust, reliable, and generalizable (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2016; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

R Square

Table 3.

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Brand Performance	0.377	0.369
Employee Brand Engagement	0.227	0.223

However, from the regression test, it is evident that employee brand engagement accounts for 22.7% of the variation in brand performance ($R^2 = 0.227$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.223$). This shows that there is a moderate relationship between the initiatives and performance outcome. Conversely, in relation to the overall performance of the brand, the regression test accounts for 37.7% of the variation ($R^2 = 0.377$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.369$). This shows that there are other factors, in addition to employee engagement, that influence the outcome of performance, such as the presence of other tangible and intangible resources (Hair et al., 2022; Barney, 1991). The results of the study confirm that employee and consumer engagement positively influence the performance of the brand, but the performance of the brand is influenced by a number of factors (Aziz et al., 2025; Centobelli et al., 2022). The results of the study also confirm that employee engagement positively influences performance outcome but only to a moderate level, like in other studies that showed that employee and consumer engagement positively influence performance but do not influence it comprehensively (Barney, 1991). The results of the study also confirm that employee engagement positively influences performance outcome but only to a moderate level, like in other studies that showed that employee and consumer engagement positively influence performance but do not influence it comprehensively (Barney, 1991).

F Square

Table 4.

	f-square
Employee Brand Engagement -> Brand Performance	0.208
Leadership Support -> Brand Performance	0.000
Market Orientation -> Brand Performance	0.025
Market Orientation -> Employee Brand Engagement	0.146
Strategic HRM Practices -> Brand Performance	0.063
Strategic HRM Practices -> Employee Brand Engagement	0.103
Leadership Support x Employee Brand Engagement -> Brand Performance	0.029

F^2 analysis highlights the strongest influence of employee brand engagement on brand performance ($F^2 = 0.208$; medium effect), thus emphasizing the critical function of employee brand engagement as a strategic resource in enhancing brand performance. Market orientation has a medium-scale influence on employee brand engagement ($F^2 = 0.146$), while the influence of SHRM practices is relatively small to medium for employee brand engagement ($F^2 = 0.103$) as well as brand performance ($F^2 = 0.063$). The remaining variables, leadership support ($F^2 = 0.000$) and the interaction of leadership support and employee brand engagement ($F^2 = 0.029$), show very small-scale influences; thus, these variables have insignificant direct roles in the study. Market orientation in brand performance also has a very small-scale influence ($F^2 = 0.025$), thus emphasizing the mediating function of employee brand engagement in the relationship between the organizational strategies of the firm and brand performance. Taken together, these findings strongly attest to the dominant function of employee brand engagement in determining brand

performance in alignment with the RBV theory, which argues that the utilization of internal firm resources can create sustained competitive advantages (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984; Hair et al., 2022; Aziz et al., 2025; Centobelli et al., 2022).

4.5 Q2 Construct cross-validated redundancy

Table 5.

	SSO	SSE	Q ² (=1-SSE/SSO)
Brand Performance	1950.000	1521.822	0.220
Employee Brand Engagement	1950.000	1714.553	0.121
Leadership Support	1950.000	1950.000	0.000
Market Orientation	1950.000	1950.000	0.000
Strategic HRM Practices	1950.000	1950.000	0.000

The predictive relevance (Q²) can be calculated using the formula: $Q^2 = 1 - SSE/SSO$ (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2022). In the current study, the brand performance has a Q² of 0.220, showing moderate predictive relevance, while the employee brand engagement has a Q² of 0.121, showing small to moderate predictive relevance. On the other hand, the leadership support, market orientation, and the strategic human resource management (HRM) practices have a Q² of 0.000, showing the absence of direct predictive relevance in the model for these constructs. This indicates that employee engagement and brand performance are the most dominant factors in the prediction of the outcomes of heritage fashion brands, with the influence of other organizational aspects being indirect in their effect on the outcomes through employee engagement channels. Overall, the results of the Q² statistics tend to reinforce the moderate predictive power of the model, in addition to confirming the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, emphasizing the pivotal role of the internal strategic brand assets in the long-term brand performance of the heritage fashion brand (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984; Aziz et al., 2025; Centobelli et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2022).

Construct Reliability

Table 6.

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Performance	0.835	0.840	0.883	0.603
Employee Brand Engagement	0.793	0.802	0.858	0.548
Leadership Support	0.854	0.867	0.894	0.629
Market Orientation	0.825	0.830	0.877	0.588
Strategic HRM Practices	0.812	0.824	0.869	0.572

Based on the reliability test, it can be noted that all the constructs have a good level of internal consistency and convergent validity. The value of Cronbach's Alpha for all the constructs lies between 0.793 for Employee Brand Engagement and 0.854 for Leadership Support, thereby exceeding the recommended level of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2022). Additionally, the value of the composite reliability (ρ_c) for all the variables lies between 0.858 and 0.894, while the value of ρ_a lies between 0.802 and 0.867 for all variables, thereby establishing a strong level of construct reliability for all variables. Furthermore, the average

variance extracted (AVE) for all the variables exceeds 0.50, ranging between 0.548 and 0.629, thereby establishing a strong level of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the constructs of brand performance, employee brand engagement, support of leaders, market-orientation, and HRM practices are reliable and valid, forming a strong basis for testing a structural model.

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) – List

Table 7.

	Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)
Employee Brand Engagement <-> Brand Performance	0.667
Leadership Support <-> Brand Performance	0.253
Leadership Support <-> Employee Brand Engagement	0.359
Market Orientation <-> Brand Performance	0.401
Market Orientation <-> Employee Brand Engagement	0.465
Market Orientation <-> Leadership Support	0.235
Strategic HRM Practices <-> Brand Performance	0.454
Strategic HRM Practices <-> Employee Brand Engagement	0.413
Strategic HRM Practices <-> Leadership Support	0.304
Strategic HRM Practices <-> Market Orientation	0.182

The HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) Ratio was used to test the discriminant validity between the constructs of this research. Based on a threshold of 0.85, all of the HTMT ratios are well within limits, ensuring that each construct is unique from other constructs (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2022). More specifically, for Employee Brand Engagement and Brand Performance, the HTMT Ratio is 0.667. The correlation is moderate but still well within limits. The other ratios for Leadership Support, Market Orientation, and Strategic HRM Practices range from 0.182 to 0.465. Taken together, this confirms that each of these constructs maintains sufficient levels of discriminant validity and are non-collinear. Taken together, this confirms that this structural model is appropriate for hypothesis testing for the independent, mediating, and dependent variables.

Outer Loading

Table 8.

	Brand Performance	Employee Brand Engagement	Leadership Support	Market Orientation	Strategic HRM Practices	Leadership Support x Employee Brand Engagement
BP1	0.776					
BP2	0.741					
BP3	0.812					
BP4	0.731					
BP5	0.817					
EBE1		0.684				
EBE2		0.810				
EBE3		0.782				
EBE4		0.684				

EBE5	0.733		
LS1		0.709	
LS2		0.799	
LS3		0.781	
LS4		0.838	
LS5		0.833	
MO1		0.747	
MO2		0.725	
MO3		0.798	
MO4		0.798	
MO5		0.762	
SHRM1			0.798
SHRM2			0.700
SHRM3			0.740
SHRM4			0.707
SHRM5			0.827
Leadership Support x Employee Brand Engagement			1.000

Analysis of outer loadings was performed to examine the indicator reliability for all measurement items. The constructs have loadings above the recommended value of 0.70, except a few (EBE1=0.684; EBE4=0.684; SHRM2=0.700), which lie just below it but are acceptable in an Exploratory Analysis (Hair et al., 2022; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). The constructs of Brand Performance (BP1–BP5) have high loadings between 0.731 and 0.817, ensuring that the indicators have a reliable measurement of the latent variables. The constructs of Employee Brand Engagement (EBE1-EBE5) have loadings between 0.684 and 0.810, whereas constructs of Leadership Support (LS1-LS5) and Market Orientation (MO1-MO5) have robust loadings between 0.709 and 0.838 and 0.725 and 0.798, respectively. The constructs of Strategic HRM Practices (SHRM1-SHRM5) have loadings between 0.707 and 0.827, ensuring that it is reliable. The interaction term (Leadership Support x Employee Brand Engagement) has a perfect loading of 1.000, as expected for a derived latent interaction construct. The outer loadings confirm that all indicators have a proper representation of their constructs, ensuring that the measurement model is reliable and valid.

Path Coefficient

The results from the structural model indicate the strength and significance of the relationships between the constructs in the study. The path from Employee Brand Engagement to Brand Performance reflects a strong and positive relationship ($\beta = 0.417$, $t = 9.491$, $p < 0.001$), implying that increasing levels of Employee Brand Engagement strongly and positively impact brand performance (Hair et al., 2022; Aziz et al., 2025). The positive impact of Strategic HRM Practices on Brand Performance ($\beta = 0.214$, $t = 4.879$, $p < 0.001$) and Employee Brand Engagement ($\beta = 0.286$, $t = 6.284$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that successful HRM practices in organizations support Employee Brand Engagement and Brand Performance outcomes. Market Orientation has strong positive relationships with Employee Brand Engagement ($\beta = 0.340$, $t = 7.967$, $p < 0.001$) and a

less strong but significant relationship with Brand Performance ($\beta = 0.137$, $t = 3.064$, $p = 0.002$). The interaction effect for the path from Leadership Support $\times$ Employee Brand Engagement $\rightarrow$ Brand Performance was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.132$, $t = 3.959$, $p < 0.001$), implying that leadership support positively moderates the Employee Brand Engagement and Brand Performance relationship. The path from Leadership Support $\rightarrow$ Brand Performance was found to be non-significant ($\beta = 0.005$, $t = 0.129$, $p = 0.897$), implying that leadership support in organizations has no effect on Brand Performance in the absence of Employee Brand Engagement as a moderating factor. The path coefficients support the implication that Employee Brand Engagement acts as an intervening variable through which organizations and their strategies and practices influence positive outcomes in Brand Performance for heritage fashion brands (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984; Centobelli et al., 2022).

Table 9.

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Employee Brand Engagement - > Brand Performance	0.417	0.417	0.044	9.491	0.000
Leadership Support -> Brand Performance	0.005	0.011	0.041	0.129	0.897
Market Orientation -> Brand Performance	0.137	0.137	0.045	3.064	0.002
Market Orientation -> Employee Brand Engagement	0.340	0.343	0.043	7.967	0.000
Strategic HRM Practices -> Brand Performance	0.214	0.214	0.044	4.879	0.000
Strategic HRM Practices -> Employee Brand Engagement	0.286	0.287	0.045	6.284	0.000
Leadership Support x Employee Brand Engagement - > Brand Performance	0.132	0.130	0.033	3.959	0.000

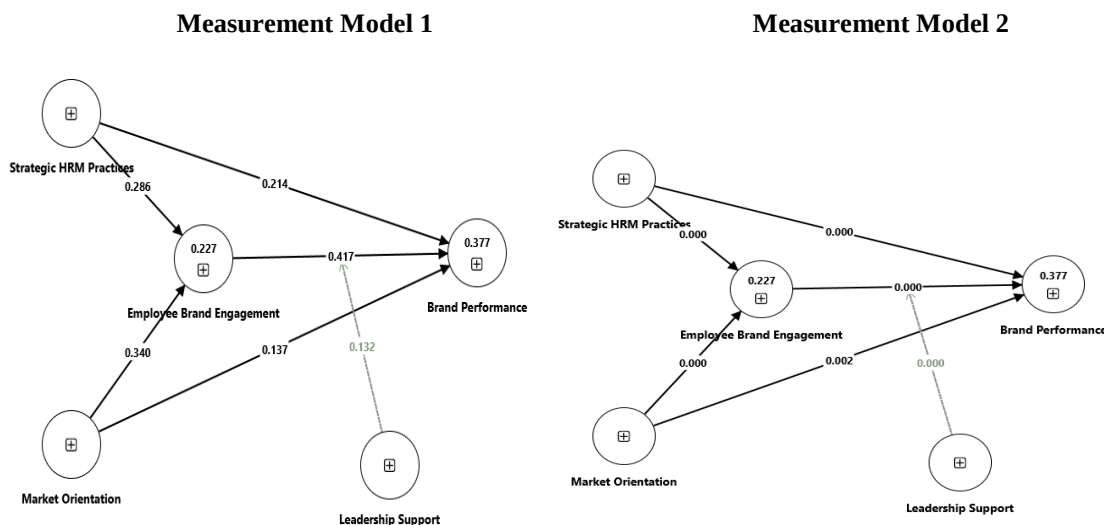
Specific indirect effects

Table 10.

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Market Orientation -> Employee Brand Engagement -> Brand Performance	0.142	0.143	0.024	5.922	0.000
Strategic HRM Practices -> Employee Brand Engagement -> Brand Performance	0.119	0.120	0.023	5.081	0.000

From the mediation analysis, it can be seen that employee brand engagement plays an important mediating role in the connection between organizational strategies and brand performance. In particular, for the causal path Market Orientation $\rightarrow$ Employee Brand Engagement $\rightarrow$ Brand

Performance, there exists an important indirect effect ($\beta = 0.142$, $t = 5.922$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that market-oriented strategies have an important impact on improving employee brand engagement, which in turn has an important impact on improving brand performance. In other words, it shows that market-oriented strategies have an important, indirect impact on improving brand performance via employee brand engagement. In addition, for another causal path, Strategic HRM Practices $\rightarrow$ Employee Brand Engagement $\rightarrow$ Brand Performance, there exists an important indirect effect ($\beta = 0.119$, $t = 5.081$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that human resource management practices have an important, indirect impact on improving brand performance via employee brand engagement. In conclusion, these findings strongly verify that employee brand engagement, playing an important mediating role, can turn organizational strategies into improved brand performance. This finding supports the RBV, which regards internal capabilities for achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984; Hair et al., 2022; Aziz et al., 2025; Centobelli et al., 2022).



DISCUSSION

The results, management should place emphasis on investment in engagement-practice orientation because employee engagement with the brand showed a strong positive impact on brand performance ($\beta = 0.417$, $t = 9.491$, $p < 0.001$; $F^2 = 0.208$; $Q^2 = 0.220$). This can include involvement, experiences, and online engagement strategies to further enhance engagement and, by extension, brand performance. Market orientation practices should also be enhanced because there are significant effects on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.340$, $t = 7.967$, $p < 0.001$; $F^2 = 0.146$) and a smaller, yet significant, direct effect on brand performance ($\beta = 0.137$, $t = 3.064$, $p = 0.002$; $F^2 = 0.025$; $Q^2 = 0.000$). Strategic HRM practices also have a positive effect on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.286$, $t = 6.284$, $p < 0.001$; $F^2 = 0.103$; $Q^2 = 0.121$) and brand performance ($\beta = 0.214$, $t = 4.879$, $p < 0.001$; $F^2 = 0.063$; $Q^2 = 0.000$), which is an indicator that HRM strategies that include a strong emphasis on branding competencies, empowerment, and skills development are also important. The finding that there is a significant moderating effect of leadership support on engagement-performance ($\beta = 0.132$, $t = 3.959$, $p < 0.001$; $F^2 = 0.029$) is an indicator that management should offer their guidance and support to enhance engagement-performance synergies. Furthermore, engagement metrics should also be implemented to monitor and enhance

engagement strategies that include emotional and behavior bonds to better align with current research on experiential and relationship engagement (Behnam et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings obtained from this research, employee brand engagement is established as a significant predictor of brand performance for heritage fashion brands competing in competitive urban settings. Market orientation and HRM practices are established as having positive impacts on employee engagement and performance, and leadership support has a positive indirect influence on employee performance through employee engagement mechanisms. The findings from this research also support and validate the significance of employee engagement as a critical mediating variable linking internal organizational factors and orientations to positive market outcomes and brand performance.

Recommendations

The findings, it can be suggested that managers in the fashion and retail sector must emphasize investing in engagement-building practices in terms of employee participation in brand communication activities, experiential activities, and digital engagement strategies to enhance consumer engagement. Market orientation practices must be enhanced to better align the efforts of the business with the needs and preferences of the consumer in order to improve engagement and performance. HR development in the business related to branding capabilities and employee empowerment can further leverage the power of engagement. The business must also contemplate the use of structured engagement metrics in order to monitor and further develop the strategies in building consumer engagement based on the latest findings in the literature emphasizing the importance of experiential and relationship sources of consumer engagement.

Limitations

This study that should be acknowledged at this point. Firstly, because it is a cross-sectional study, it is not possible to make any claims about causality or the time-related nature of the effects of engagement, and these could be explored using longitudinal studies in the future. Secondly, because it only includes participants living in one urban environment (the city of Karachi), it is not clear how easily the findings can be generalized to other cultural settings or market conditions. Thirdly, although this study has concentrated on a number of organizational variables, other variables such as brand experience, digital marketing maturity, and social interactivity could also be influential in terms of engagement and performance and could be explored in future studies. Finally, because this study has relied on self-report measures, it could be vulnerable to common method variance, which could be controlled for in future studies using multiple sources of data or experimental methods.

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