



Orientação:



UNIVERSIDADE PORTUCALENSE

Do conhecimento à prática.

FROM THE INSIDE OUT: EMPLOYEE-BASED BRAND EQUITY AND B2B BRANDING DYNAMICS

An exploratory and multilevel analysis

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Dedictory

*À Maria de Lurdes,
minha eterna avó e amiga*

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Abstract

In an era where global competition is intensifying, fueled by rapid globalization, technological advances, and fluctuating economic conditions, brand equity has emerged as a critical aspect of organizational competitiveness and sustainability. The strategic significance of brand equity, recognized as the inherent value a brand adds to an organization, underscores its role as an important asset in navigating the complexities of the global marketplace. This doctoral thesis investigates the pivotal role of Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) in enhancing brand equity within the B2B sector, framed through an exploratory and multilevel analysis. The complexity of B2B transactions, characterized by high levels of interaction, places employees at the forefront of brand representation and advocacy. This thesis aims to address the literature gap by focusing on EBBE's impact on brand equity in B2B contexts, where direct employee-customer interactions are critical. To accomplish its objectives, the thesis employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating three main studies that collectively address the nuanced relationships between brand-specific transformational leadership, employer branding, EBBE, B2B brand image, brand loyalty and B2B overall brand equity. The first study systematically reviews the literature to construct an integrative framework of EBBE. The second and third studies empirically test the relationships between brand-specific transformational leadership, employer branding, and EBBE, and explore the multi-level effects of EBBE on B2B brand equity, respectively. The findings from these investigations underscore the strategic importance of cultivating a strong EBBE to enhance B2B branding efforts. Specifically, they reveal that effective employer branding practices, coupled with leadership that aligns with brand values, significantly boost EBBE, which in turn positively influences brand image, loyalty, and overall brand equity in the B2B context. Moreover, this thesis provides theoretical contributions by advancing our understanding of EBBE's mechanisms within B2B firms and offers practical implications for managers aiming to leverage EBBE for enhanced brand performance and competitiveness. Through its comprehensive analysis and integrative framework, the thesis highlights the pivotal role of employees as brand ambassadors and the strategic necessity of aligning internal and external brand-building efforts for achieving sustainable competitive advantage in the B2B landscape.

Keywords: Employee-based brand equity; B2B Brand Equity; Employer Branding; Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership

DE DENTRO PARA FORA: EMPLOYEE-BASED BRAND EQUITY E AS SUAS DINÂMICAS NO B2B BRANDING

Uma análise exploratória e multinível

Resumo

Numa era em que a competição global está a intensificar-se, alimentada pela rápida globalização, avanços tecnológicos e condições económicas flutuantes, o Brand Equity surgiu como um aspeto crítico da competitividade e sustentabilidade organizacional. A importância estratégica do Brand Equity, reconhecido como o valor intrínseco que uma marca adiciona a uma organização, sublinha o seu papel como um ativo vital na navegação do mercado global. A presente tese doutoral investiga o papel do Employee-Based Brand Equity na melhoria do Brand Equity dentro do setor B2B, através de uma análise exploratória e multinível. A complexidade das transações B2B, caracterizadas por altos níveis de interação, coloca os colaboradores na linha da frente da representação da marca. Esta tese visa explorar a lacuna existente na literatura, focando-se no impacto do EBBE no Brand Equity em contextos B2B, onde interações diretas entre colaboradores e clientes são críticas. Para alcançar os seus objetivos, a tese emprega uma abordagem de métodos mistos, incorporando três estudos principais que, coletivamente, abordam as relações matizadas entre liderança transformacional específica de marca, employer branding, EBBE, imagem de marca B2B, lealdade à marca e B2B Brand Equity. O primeiro estudo revisa sistematicamente a literatura para construir um quadro integrativo do EBBE. Os segundo e terceiro estudos testam empiricamente as relações entre liderança transformacional específica de marca, Employer branding e EBBE, e exploram os efeitos multinível do EBBE no B2B Brand Equity, respetivamente. As descobertas destas investigações sublinham a importância estratégica de cultivar um forte EBBE para melhorar os esforços do B2B branding. Especificamente, revelam que práticas eficazes de Employer branding, juntamente com uma liderança que se alinha com os valores da marca, aumentam significativamente o EBBE, que, por sua vez, influencia positivamente a imagem de marca, lealdade à marca e o Brand Equity no contexto B2B. Além disso, esta tese fornece contribuições teóricas, avançando a compreensão dos mecanismos do EBBE dentro de empresas B2B e oferece implicações práticas para gestores que visam alavancar o EBBE para um melhor desempenho global da marca. Através da sua análise abrangente e do seu framework integrativo, a tese destaca o papel vital dos colaboradores como embaixadores da marca e a necessidade estratégica de alinhar esforços de construção de marca internos e externos para alcançar uma vantagem competitiva sustentável no panorama de B2B.

Palavras-chave: Employee-based brand equity; B2B Brand Equity; Employer Branding; Liderança Transformacional Específica de Marca

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PART I

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

1.1 Motivation and Rationale

In today's global marketplace, organizations are confronted with unparalleled levels of competition, fuelled by the rapid pace of globalization, technological advancements, and fluctuating economic landscapes. These forces are transforming the very foundations of business practices and the nature of competitive challenges (Ongsakul et al., 2019). Amidst such a dynamic and competitive environment, strong branding has never been more critical to an organization's endurance and success (Bharadwaj et al., 2021; Davcik et al., 2015). The fabric of modern society is intricately woven with the brands we interact with, defined by their names, symbols, and the values they espouse, elevating branding from a mere corporate asset to a pivotal societal pillar. In a world where longevity and relevance increasingly hinge on brand identity, effective brand management becomes imperative for navigating the complexities and uncertainties of the global market (Davcik et al., 2015; Karadeniz, 2010). As a response, corporations are strategically honing their brand equity management approaches to safeguard and bolster their position in the face of ongoing environmental shifts (Karadeniz, 2010).

Brand equity, recognized as the intrinsic value that a brand contributes to both the company and its customers, is often highlighted by scholars as the paramount asset within any organization's portfolio (Herrmann et al., 2007). For managers, elevating brand effectiveness stands as a critical priority due to the multifaceted benefits that high brand equity brings (Keller, 1993). These benefits include enhancing brand loyalty, elevating brand awareness, fostering positive customer perceptions and emotions, diminishing sensitivity to price, lowering financial and psychological risks, and bolstering perceived quality and credibility, all of which cumulatively contribute to substantial financial advantages like increased market share (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006a; DuBois Gelb & Rangarajan, 2014; Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006). Such dynamics underscore the imperative for organizations to proactively craft and nurture their brand, offering comprehensive value propositions that appeal to stakeholders on economic, emotional, and symbolic fronts (Aaker, 1996b; Ambler & Barrow, 1996). In essence, the power of a well-defined brand lies in its ability not just to surpass the inherent value of the product or service it represents, but to create a lasting impact through the intangible perceptions and relationships it fosters with its audience. As such, brand equity represents the collective influence of a brand's identity on its marketplace leverage and

financial success (Herrmann et al., 2007). The pursuit of enhanced brand equity, therefore, demands a strategic focus on nurturing key attributes such as loyalty, brand awareness, and favorable customer views, critical for fostering market expansion and economic gain, positioning strong brands as indispensable tools for organizations seeking a decisive competitive edge (H. Kim et al., 2003).

However, strong brands are built on the foundation of consistency between the brand promise communicated and the brand experience delivered (King et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2009, 2010). Understanding how employees perceive and embody the brand, and how this perception influences their behavior towards customers and the brand itself, is crucial for the success of the branding process. Without the alignment of internal stakeholders with the company's core values, the customer's interaction with the brand promise may fall short of expectations (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Du Preez et al., 2017; Helm et al., 2016). Therefore, employees must have a deep comprehension of the brand's essence, recognizing its significance to them and its relevance to their specific roles and duties (King et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2009, 2010). This ensures the fulfillment of the brand promise. Effective brand management must integrate employees' insights and perspectives on the brand into its strategy (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006a). The endeavor to cultivate a company's brand equity begins from within, at a time when organizations are more actively fostering a culture where employees are empowered and motivated to serve as brand advocates (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006).

Since its inception in 2009, the concept of Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) has significantly evolved, garnering interest from both academic researchers and industry professionals due to its impact on brand management and organizational achievements (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a). EBBE is characterized by the unique influence that the understanding of the brand exerts on an employee's engagement within their workplace, needing that the brand's identity be communicated in a manner that resonates personally with each employee, aligning with their specific duties and roles (King et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2009, 2010). This progression highlights an expanding dialogue in both scholarly and practical realms, dedicated to exploring, understanding, and operationalizing EBBE, thus enriching our comprehension of how it operates, what drives it, and the effects it produces. However, despite acknowledgment of EBBE's critical role, there is an observed shortfall in research that delves into actionable strategies to enhance its influence, ensuring that employees not only internalize but also champion the brand's core values and commitments (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a).

Addressing this research deficiency is vital for maximizing the potential of employees as pivotal brand advocates, thereby strengthening the brand's unity internally and improving its perception externally.

Within the current landscape marked by a pronounced talent shortage, the challenge of nurturing employees who authentically embody and propagate a brand's essence is particularly daunting. This dilemma is acute in Portugal, where, as highlighted by ManpowerGroup's "Talent Shortage Survey 2024," a significant 65% of employers encounter difficulties in sourcing professionals who meet their criteria, with 16% facing substantial hurdles. Positioned as the fifth nation globally for experiencing the most severe professional shortages—surpassing the 75% global average—Portugal, alongside Ireland and India, grapples with this issue, while Japan faces even stiffer challenges at 85%. This talent scarcity intensifies the struggle to attract and retain the caliber of employees capable of acting as true brand advocates. In response, both industry experts and scholars are tasked with devising strategies that foster enriching, enduring connections between companies and their workforce (Badawy et al., 2017).

In the VUCA (volatility, complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity) context, the imperative for organizations to onboard agile leaders becomes also clear. Such leaders are instrumental in cultivating a workplace culture that prizes the recruitment and retention of dynamic, innovative talent—key to forging resilient brands from within (Bharadwaj et al., 2021). Leadership's role in this endeavor is paramount. To establish formidable brands, leaders are required to not only define and disseminate a clear and engaging brand vision and mission but also to underscore and embody the brand's foundational values (Morhart et al., 2009). By transparently communicating these elements to their teams and modeling the desired attitudes and behaviors, leaders can significantly influence their employees to align with and advocate for the brand's promise (Chiang et al., 2020). This leadership approach is essential for building cohesive brands that resonate strongly both internally among employees and externally in the marketplace.

In the commercial arena, transactions between businesses (B2B) are fundamental to driving economic dynamics. Yet, the critical discourse on branding has predominantly centered around consumer-facing interactions, often overlooking the significant impact and necessity of branding within the B2B sector (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a). As so, the exploration of brand equity within the B2B sector emerges as a critical area of research, distinct from the more frequently studied Business-to-Consumer (B2C) markets. The complexity and high-value nature of B2B transactions demands a deeper

understanding of how brands can navigate and thrive in such environments (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a; Kristal et al., 2020). Current literature reveals a notable gap in this area, particularly concerning the specific role and impact of EBBE in B2B contexts (Bendixen et al., 2004; Biedenbach et al., 2019; Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011). This gap underscores the urgent need for focused research to decode the subtleties of EBBE and its potential to drive corporate success in B2B markets. The significance of EBBE in B2B settings cannot be overstated. Unlike in B2C scenarios where direct interactions between employees and customers might be less critical, the B2B landscape, with its intricate products and services, demands thorough explanations and engagements (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a). These interactions are not only essential for clear communication but also for building personal connections, emotional attachments, and fostering an environment where employees feel motivated to engage actively with customers. This level of engagement is pivotal for developing a strong brand image and identity, key drivers of success in the B2B sector (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a). Addressing this oversight is vital for developing effective brand management strategies that consider the unique dynamics of B2B relationships, trust, and value perception. The evolving global business landscape, marked by rapid changes in technology and market conditions, further accentuates the need for robust brand equity as a strategic asset to enhance organizational resilience and maintain a competitive advantage (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a; Kristal et al., 2020).

This thesis will delve into the pivotal role of EBBE in enhancing brand equity within B2B sectors, aiming to illuminate how employees, as brand ambassadors, contribute significantly to a brand's market position and growth. It seeks to offer actionable insights for effectively leveraging the unique capabilities of internal brand champions, thereby achieving strategic differentiation and fostering sustainable development in a market characterized by intense competition and globalization. Addressing gaps in the existing literature—particularly the need for broader research about EBBE across various sectors beyond services, the effect of EBBE on B2B brand equity, the influence of brand-specific leadership, and the role of employer branding—this study aims to enrich both theoretical and practical understanding of brand management within the B2B context. Insights derived from this research are intended to guide marketers, managers, and HR professionals in a cohesive, multidisciplinary approach toward harnessing competitive advantages.

To sum up, this motivational and rationale section underscores the strategic importance of exploring EBBE within the B2B sector. This doctoral thesis aims to enrich the

academic discourse on brand equity but also equips practitioners with actionable strategies and frameworks for leveraging internal capabilities to enhance brand equity. Through a multidisciplinary approach involving marketing, management, and HR, this research aims to illuminate pathways to achieving competitive advantage, fostering stronger, more resilient brands capable of thriving in an ever-evolving business environment. The exploration of EBBE in B2B settings is poised to offer a new lens through which organizations can view and leverage their internal brand-building efforts, contributing to the broader understanding of brand equity and its impact on organizational success.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This thesis is anchored in two foundational theories: brand equity theory, which elucidates the value branding elements add to a company or product (Aaker, 1991; Davcik et al., 2015; Farquhar, 1989; Keller, 1993), and social identity theory, which examines how individual affiliations, including employer associations, shape self-concept and behavior (H. E. Tajfel, 1978). These theoretical frameworks are instrumental in understanding how employees' engagement with the brand influences overall brand equity in B2B settings.

Social Identity Theory has been widely applied across diverse fields, from consumer psychology to mass communications, standing as a cornerstone in social psychology. It seeks to unravel the cognitive, interactive, and social facets of group dynamics (Mavuso et al., 2020). This theory suggests that individuals' self-concepts are partly shaped by their psychological engagement with various social groups (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). As originally outlined by Tajfel, (1981), social identity constitutes a segment of an individual's self-concept that originates from their awareness of membership in social groups. This awareness not only includes recognition of group membership but also carries with it emotional and evaluative significance (Tajfel, 1978). Social Identity Theory elaborates on social identity to elucidate patterns of intergroup behaviors. Tajfel, (1978) argued that affiliations with groups contribute significantly to pride and self-esteem, transforming self-perceptions from individual to collective identities and influencing a shift from personal to group intentions (Brewer, 1991). Consequently, individuals forge a perceived social identity based on the attributes and social markers, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, associated with their groups (Chan, 2016). This theoretical framework provides valuable insights into how group culture and social identity shape member attitudes and experiences (Sharpley, 2014).

This theory holds significant relevance for this study, as it offers insights into why employees choose to align with a brand's values and mission (Mavuso et al., 2020). When individuals perceive themselves as integral parts of an organization, they naturally orient their actions and mindset toward fulfilling the entity's objectives (Mills et al., 2014). This sense of identification extends from the broader organizational context down to specific corporate brand affiliations (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a). Drawing from the principles of Social Identity Theory, it is anticipated that individuals will likely exhibit behaviors that reinforce their alignment with group norms, thereby contributing to the collective welfare and, consequently, enhancing brand equity (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). Employees deeply rooted in their organizational identity feel a shared responsibility for their triumphs and setbacks. Such a profound connection motivates them to undertake actions that elevate the organization's and their brand value (H. Tajfel & J. C. Turner, 1979). This elucidation underscores the pivotal role of Social Identity Theory in conceptualizing employees as brand ambassadors and linking them to critical constructs like leadership dynamics and employer branding strategies.

Considering the purpose of this study, it's also essential to delve into the theory of brand equity. At the outset, understanding brand equity involves defining what a "brand" entails. A brand can be conceived as either a symbol or a name, representing a product or serving as a symbolic frame for both utilitarian and non-utilitarian values (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007). Kotler, (1991) conceptualized a brand as a name, term, sign, symbol, or design that identifies the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers and differentiates them from competitors. Essentially, a brand embodies a collection of symbolic, functional, and emotional benefits that are challenging for rivals to imitate, thus fostering organizational longevity (King & Grace, 2010).

Therefore, a brand transcends being merely a product's name. It signifies a provider's commitment to consistently fulfill their promises (Davicik et al., 2015). Modern branding strategies encompass both tangible attributes related to the product (such as differentiation by name, color, or other visible traits) and intangible aspects, including consumer expectations of utility or subjectivity. Contemporary branding discourse primarily focuses on aspects like consumer attitudes, loyalty, perceptions, and marketing investments in a brand (Davicik et al., 2015). Indeed, the distinctiveness of a branded product lies in the totality of a customer's perceptions and feelings about the company's characteristics, performance, and objectives associated with the brand (Keller, 2008; Reza Jalalzadeh et al., 2021). Sadek et al., (2015) argue that strong brands and the concept of brand equity are crucial for securing a competitive edge. Perceived as the

outcome of these efforts, brand equity has emerged as one of the pivotal marketing concepts introduced in the 1980s (Bravo Gil et al., 2007). Brand equity is deemed a key construct in brand management, both from academic and business perspectives (Yang et al., 2015). Traditionally defined as the aggregate of a brand's assets and liabilities, including its logo, which enhances or detracts from the value a product or service brings to a company (Aaker, 1991). Fetscherin & Toncar, (2009) viewed brand equity as the inherent value a brand adds to a tangible product or service. Srinivasan et al., (2005) described brand equity as the brand's annual incremental contribution compared to a baseline product. Brand equity succinctly encapsulates a brand's worth, enabling a company to distinguish itself from competitors (Devendranath Reddy & Fabiyola Kavitha, 2019). The discourse on brand equity has been extensively covered in marketing literature, with numerous authors offering various definitions and perspectives on the factors that shape it (Aaker, 1991; Davcik et al., 2015; Farquhar, 1989; Keller, 1993). Although the term "equity" originates from finance, its essence in marketing captures a subjective viewpoint, emphasizing the intangible cues valued by consumers (Davcik et al., 2015). Brand equity has evolved from being viewed primarily through a financial lens to encompassing consumer and employee perspectives. Financial proponents view brand equity as the total value of a brand upon sale or inclusion in a balance sheet (Atilgan et al., 2009). Conversely, customer-based brand equity (CBBE) adopts the consumer viewpoint (Keller, 1998). The concept of employee-based brand equity (EBBE) is distinguished by the unique effect that brand knowledge exerts on an employee's workplace response, necessitating the translation of brand identity into meaningful terms for the employee, aligned with their specific roles and responsibilities (King et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2009, 2010).

1.3 Objectives of the work

At the heart of this doctoral thesis is an exploration of the intricate relationship between EBBE and branding dynamics within the B2B domain. The research is underpinned by a series of objectives, poised to contribute to the discourse on brand equity. Central to the thesis is the ambition to deepen the theoretical understanding of EBBE's origins and its consequential impact on the B2B sector. This study aims to create a robust theoretical framework that underlines the mechanisms that facilitate EBBE within B2B organizations and assess how it influences overall brand equity, thereby advocating for a

comprehensive brand management strategy that synergizes both internal and external brand-building efforts to boost competitive edge in the B2B arena.

Moreover, this thesis is committed to transcending theoretical exploration by delineating the practical applications of these insights. It seeks to fuse theory with practice, illustrating how the derived insights can be translated into actionable strategies. This includes crafting tailored recommendations that cater specifically to the nuanced demands of the B2B sector, thereby guiding organizations toward creating robust, enduring brands capable of achieving sustainable competitive advantages.

Ultimately, this thesis presents a holistic vision of sustainable brand development within the B2B context, incorporating EBBE antecedents and influences on B2B brand equity. The goal is not only to advance academic understanding but also to provide a practical blueprint for companies striving to forge strong brands that stand the test of time. The core model of this thesis (Figure 1) encapsulates this analytical journey, aiming to significantly enrich the body of knowledge in this area of study.

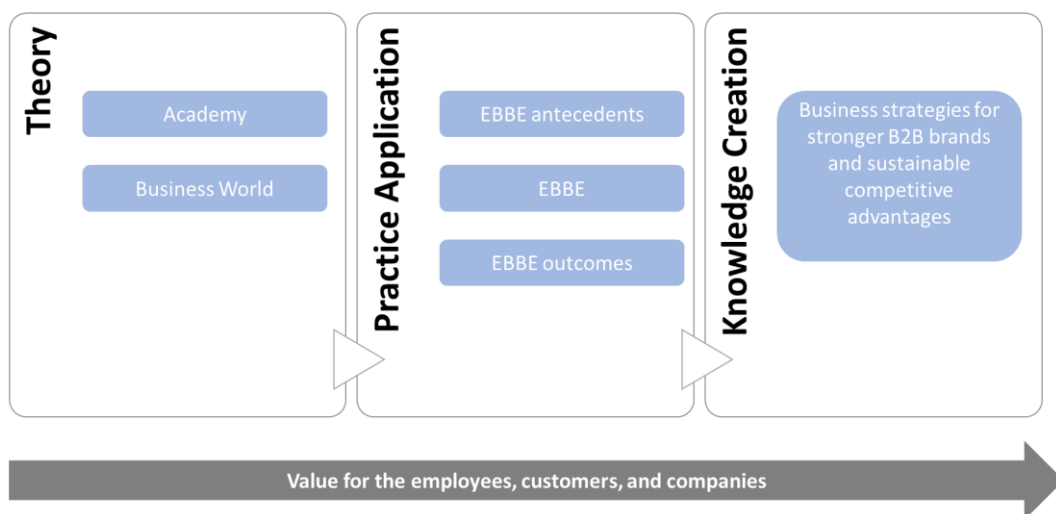


Figure 1 - Core Doctoral Thesis Model

Source: Own Elaboration

The general objective of this thesis is to comprehend the interplay between EBBE and its ramifications on the branding dynamics within the B2B sector, delineating the antecedents of EBBE and observing its influence on the brand equity of B2B firms. By integrating both internal and external brand-building efforts, the thesis endeavors to furnish companies with the strategies necessary to enhance their competitiveness in the B2B landscape.

To achieve this broad aim, specific objectives have been set:

- Identify the literature that elucidates the historical evolution, foundational models, determinants, and impacts of EBBE;
- Analyse the influence of brand-specific transformational leadership and employer branding in EBBE in B2B sector;
- Analyse the influence of EBBE on B2B brand image, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity

The first specific objective seeks to map the terrain of existing knowledge on EBBE, tracing its historical development, key models, and the factors that influence it. This objective is foundational, setting the stage for a deeper dive into EBBE by clarifying its conceptual basis and evolution. It establishes a solid academic foundation, ensuring that the subsequent analysis is grounded in a comprehensive understanding of past and current scholarly discussions.

The second specific objective zeros in on the critical roles of brand-specific transformational leadership and employer branding within the context of EBBE in B2B sectors. This aim is integral as it addresses the mechanisms through which EBBE can be nurtured and amplified, providing insights into the leadership and branding practices that effectively engage employees as brand ambassadors. Understanding these dynamics is key to leveraging internal branding efforts that align with and enhance overall brand equity.

The final specific objective explores the tangible outcomes of EBBE, specifically its influence on brand image, loyalty, and overall brand equity within B2B contexts. This aim is directly tied to the thesis's central ambition of bridging theoretical insights with practical brand management applications. By examining how EBBE translates into measurable external impacts on brand perception and loyalty, this objective offers a direct pathway to harnessing EBBE for sustainable competitive advantage.

Each objective is linked to both the core problem being investigated and the thesis's primary goal, offering a clear rationale for their selection. By systematically addressing these objectives, the thesis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of EBBE's role in shaping B2B brand dynamics, offering both theoretical contributions and actionable strategies for practitioners in the field.

Bearing in mind the problems to be investigated and the objectives to be met, a relationship can be established between the research questions and the proposed objectives (Table 1).

To meet Objective 1, we have defined several research questions. These questions are crucial for unraveling the essence and trajectory of EBBE in the scholarly domain.

- What are the main antecedents of EBBE? This question seeks to uncover the core factors and conditions that give rise to EBBE within organizations, aiming to delineate the foundational elements that contribute to the development of strong EBBE.
- What are the main results of companies with high EBBE? By exploring this question, we aim to highlight the tangible benefits and competitive advantages that accrue to firms exhibiting a high level of EBBE.
- What are the main future research directions towards EBBE? This question is intended to identify gaps in the current literature and propose areas for future exploration, aiming to foster the continuous evolution of our understanding of EBBE.

To fulfill Objective 2, we have outlined two pivotal research questions. These inquiries are designed to dissect the dynamics between brand-specific leadership, employer branding, and EBBE, providing a deeper understanding of their interplay:

- How does brand-specific transformational leadership influence employer branding and, subsequently, EBBE within B2B service sectors? This question delves into the role of transformational leaders who are specifically attuned to brand values and how their leadership style affects employer branding initiatives and their effectiveness in bolstering EBBE. The aim is to uncover the mechanisms through which such leadership can foster a brand-aligned corporate culture and enhance brand equity from within.
- Does employer branding mediate the relationship between brand-specific transformational leadership and EBBE in the B2B context? By exploring this question, we seek to understand whether employer branding acts as a crucial link that translates the impact of brand-specific transformational leadership into tangible improvements in EBBE.

For Objective 3, we've established two critical research questions. These inquiries intend to elucidate the effects of EBBE on key brand metrics, providing a comprehensive view of how EBBE impacts the broader brand landscape:

- How do the dimensions of EBBE interact with brand image, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity within B2B firms? This question investigates the multifaceted

nature of EBBE and its direct impact on the perception of the brand, customer commitment to the brand, and the cumulative value of the brand. The aim is to uncover how EBBE's various components contribute to strengthening the brand's market position and relationships with clients.

- In the context of B2B firms, what is the mediating role of brand image and brand loyalty in the relationship between EBBE and overall brand equity? By exploring this question, we intend to identify whether brand image and loyalty serve as intermediary factors that enhance or modify the impact of EBBE on the brand's overall equity. This inquiry is focused on understanding the pathways through which EBBE influences brand equity, highlighting the importance of maintaining a positive brand image and fostering loyalty among B2B clients.

Addressing these research questions allows us to explore the multifaceted relationship between EBBE and its impact on the dynamics of branding in the B2B sector.

Table 1 - Research questions and proposed objectives

	Objective 1 Chapter 2	Objective 2 Chapter 3	Objective 3 Chapter 4
	Identify the literature that elucidates the historical evolution, foundational models, determinants, and impacts of EBBE.	Analyze the influence of brand-specific transformational leadership and employer branding in EBBE in the B2B sector.	Analyze the influence of EBBE on B2B brand image, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity.
What are the main antecedents of EBBE?	X		
What are the main results of companies with high EBBE?	X		
What are the main future research directions towards EBBE?	X		
How does brand-specific transformational leadership influence employer branding and, subsequently, EBBE within B2B service sectors?		X	

Does employer branding mediate the relationship between brand-specific transformational leadership and EBBE in the B2B context?		X	
How do the dimensions of EBBE interact with brand image, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity within B2B firms?			X
In the context of B2B firms, what is the mediating role of brand image and brand loyalty in the relationship between EBBE and overall brand equity?			X

Source: Own Elaboration

1.4 Methodology

In examining the genesis and evolution of knowledge, epistemological discourse frequently takes center stage, underscoring the essence of scientific inquiry in validating emergent insights within scholarly fields (Johnson, 1996). The pursuit of scientific exploration is fundamentally aimed at legitimizing newfound knowledge across various disciplines (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). Drawing on Aristotle's seminal thoughts, Peirce, (1997) delineated three principal methodologies of reasoning—abduction, induction, and deduction—each playing a pivotal role in the construction of knowledge. Abductive reasoning embarks on formulating plausible hypotheses that are subject to iterative refinement and are temporarily upheld, emphasizing the transition from discrete observations to specific inferences (Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018). Inductive reasoning, conversely, posits that the premises, when likely true, lead to conclusions that are unlikely to be false, facilitating a progression from individual instances to overarching generalizations (Hurley, 2014). Deductive reasoning, meanwhile, progresses from a broad theoretical basis to specific predictions, offering a structured pathway to test hypotheses, thereby ensuring a heightened level of certainty wherein true premises necessitate true conclusions (Hurley, 2014). Abductive reasoning thus lays the groundwork for plausible explanations, induction for probable generalizations, and deduction for assured conclusions derived from theoretical propositions (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013).

The selection and application of rigorous research methodologies significantly influence the outcomes and implications of scholarly studies (Scandura & Williams, 2000). This thesis adopts a deductive research approach, methodically descending from a broad theoretical exploration of EBBE to the empirical examination of specific relationships and effects. Guided by established theories of brand equity and social identity theory, it aims to rigorously test hypotheses concerning the antecedents, manifestations, and impacts of EBBE on the B2B sector. By integrating insights from a systematic literature review with quantitative analysis, the thesis seeks to unveil the ways in which brand-specific transformational leadership and employer branding influence EBBE and, by extension, overall brand equity in the B2B sector. This structured approach ensures the research is firmly anchored in established theories while facilitating empirical validation (Figure 2).

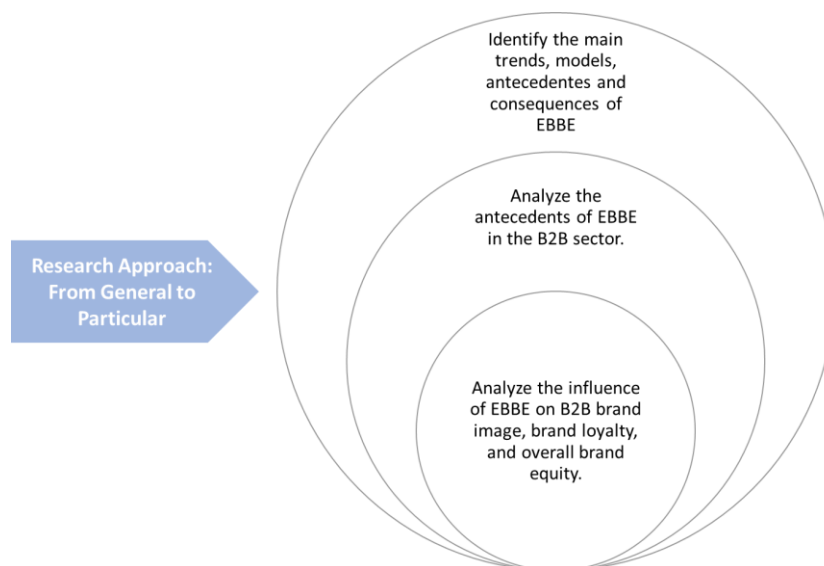


Figure 2 - Research Scientific Approach

Source: Own Elaboration

1.5 Approaches in Individual Chapters

Each chapter within this thesis employs its method, with the specific approaches used detailed in Table 2. Subsequent paragraphs provide an in-depth discussion of the overarching research strategy of this thesis.

Table 2- Systematization of the adopted methodology.

Chapter	Methods
Chapter 2	Theoretical – Systematic Literature Review
Chapter 3	Quantitative - SPSS v.25 - statistical analysis; Smart PLS 3.0 software - Partial Least Squares method.
Chapter 4	Quantitative - SPSS v.25 - statistical analysis; Smart PLS 3.0 software - Partial Least Squares method.

Source: Own Elaboration

Chapter 2 adopts a methodical systematic literature review to dissect and integrate findings from 30 selected studies on EBBE sourced from Scopus and Web of Science databases. This chapter intricately categorizes the accumulated literature into three distinct thematic groups through a detailed thematic and content analysis. The objective is to delineate the trajectory of EBBE research, uncover key themes, and debates, and identify gaps for future exploration. This systematic approach aims to consolidate existing knowledge on EBBE, shedding light on its general model, causes, effects, and the influence of culture, leadership, and brand management strategies. The methodology unfolds in a structured manner, adhering to the five-step process outlined by Khan et al., (2003): defining research questions, identifying relevant studies, assessing the quality of these studies, summarizing evidence, and interpreting results. For data collection, the terms "employee-based brand equity" and "employee brand equity" were meticulously searched across titles, abstracts, and keywords in articles, review articles, and early access documents published in English within the management, business, and economics disciplines, as categorized by Web of Science, and similarly in SCOPUS under Business, Management and Accounting; Social Sciences; Economics, Econometrics and Finance. This meticulous selection process, conducted in April 2023, ultimately compiled 30 pertinent articles. To systematically analyze and cluster the gathered articles, we employed the methodological framework proposed by Denyer & Tranfield, (2009) and Sarka & Ipsen, (2017), ensuring a comprehensive summary of each study's descriptive, methodological, and thematic aspects. Adopting an inductive thematic analysis, as recommended by Thomas & Angela Harden, (2008), allowed for the extraction, grouping, and synthesis of key themes into analytical categories. This phase aimed at pinpointing primary predictors, mediators, and actionable strategies within the realm of EBBE. To ensure coding reliability, two independent coders engaged in the process, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached (Cho, 2008).

Chapter 3 adopts a quantitative research methodology, leveraging validated scales from prior studies to measure its constructs effectively. For the assessment of EBBE, this research uses the scale established by King et al., (2012). Employer branding is measured through the comprehensive scale formulated by Tanwar & Prasad, (2017), while brand-specific transformational leadership is evaluated using the framework developed by Morhart et al., (2009). Consistent with these studies, responses were gauged on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to capture participants' attitudes accurately. The empirical data for this study was gathered from the B2B services sector, with four Portuguese companies participating. The recruitment process involved distributing the online survey to employees via their HR departments, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The survey, conducted in Portuguese between May and July 2023, was meticulously reviewed by a native proofreader to ensure linguistic precision and clarity. Out of 936 distributed questionnaires, 491 were completed and returned, resulting in a commendable response rate of 52%. The data analysis was conducted in phases, beginning with statistical examinations of variables and their measurement items using SPSS software (version 25). This initial analysis aimed to verify the items' validity and reliability. Further, the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method, executed through Smart PLS (Version 3.0), was applied to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs, providing robust insights into the dynamics at play within the B2B services industry's context.

Chapter 4 of this thesis is also quantitative and integrates established scales from prior research to meticulously measure the constructs of overall B2B brand equity, brand image, brand loyalty, and EBBE. Drawing from the foundational work of Keller (1993), Davis et al. (2008, 2009), Juntunen et al. (2011), and King et al. (2012), this chapter ensures the reliability and validity of its measurements across these dimensions. The use of a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), facilitates a structured assessment of each construct. This research unfolds within the B2B services sector, engaging with both employees and customers from four Portuguese companies to garner insights into EBBE alongside overall brand equity, image, and loyalty. Distinctly, EBBE was appraised through an employee-focused survey (same used in Chapter 3), while assessments of brand equity, image, and loyalty were derived from customer responses. This dual-perspective approach aims to encapsulate the viewpoints of both internal stakeholders (employees) and external stakeholders (clients), addressing previous research limitations by incorporating client perspectives into the evaluation of external brand equity. Data was collected via online surveys distributed by the Marketing and HR leaders of the participating companies to their respective

employee and customer databases, with confidentiality and anonymity prioritized to ensure the integrity of the process. From the total of 1697 distributed questionnaires (936 to employees and 761 to customers), 491 employee responses and 366 customer responses were obtained, translating to response rates of 52% and 48%, respectively. The surveys were administered from May to July 2023. Given the dual nature of the data sets and the necessity to analyze constructs at both the employee and client levels, this study employs multilevel structural equation modeling (SEM). This choice acknowledges the complexities of data clustering within B2B contexts and opts for SEM over hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) due to HLM's inherent limitations in estimating model relationships and potential biases in outcomes. The SEM analysis, conducted via the partial least square (PLS) method using Smart PLS (Version 3.0), offers a nuanced exploration of the structural model's variable relationships. To facilitate the aggregation of data, responses from employees and clients within the same company were matched using a unique company code. This process averaged employees' responses per item for each company and assigned these averages to corresponding clients, merging the two data sets into a comprehensive analytical framework. Following this, the study proceeded with a detailed statistical analysis of variables and their items using SPSS (version 25), ensuring the constructs' measurement validity and reliability while also addressing common method bias. The structural model's hypotheses were rigorously tested, with mediating effects evaluated through bootstrap analysis, enhancing the study's methodological rigor and contributing significantly to the understanding of EBBE within the B2B services industry.

1.6 Thesis outline

This thesis is organized into three distinct sections, as depicted in Figure 3. The first section, Part I, begins with Chapter 1, titled "Introduction." Within this chapter, readers are introduced to the thesis's driving motivation and underlying rationale, the defined objectives of the study, the research methodology employed, and an overview of the thesis structure. Part II is composed of three interconnected chapters, each playing a pivotal role in achieving the thesis's primary goal. These include Chapter 2 – "Employee-Based Brand Equity: A Systematic Review of Literature, Framework Development, and Implications for Future Research", Chapter 3 – "In the heart of B2B Branding: Exploring the Link Between Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership, Employer Branding and Employee-Based Brand Equity", and Chapter 4 – "From Within: How Employee-Based Brand Equity Influences B2B Brand Equity - A Multilevel Study". Concluding the thesis,

Part III features Chapter 5 - "Conclusion," which encapsulates the key research outcomes, introduces the developed model, and discusses theoretical and practical contributions. This section also outlines the research's limitations and suggests avenues for future inquiry. Additionally, this chapter highlights the studies constituting this thesis's corpus that have been published.

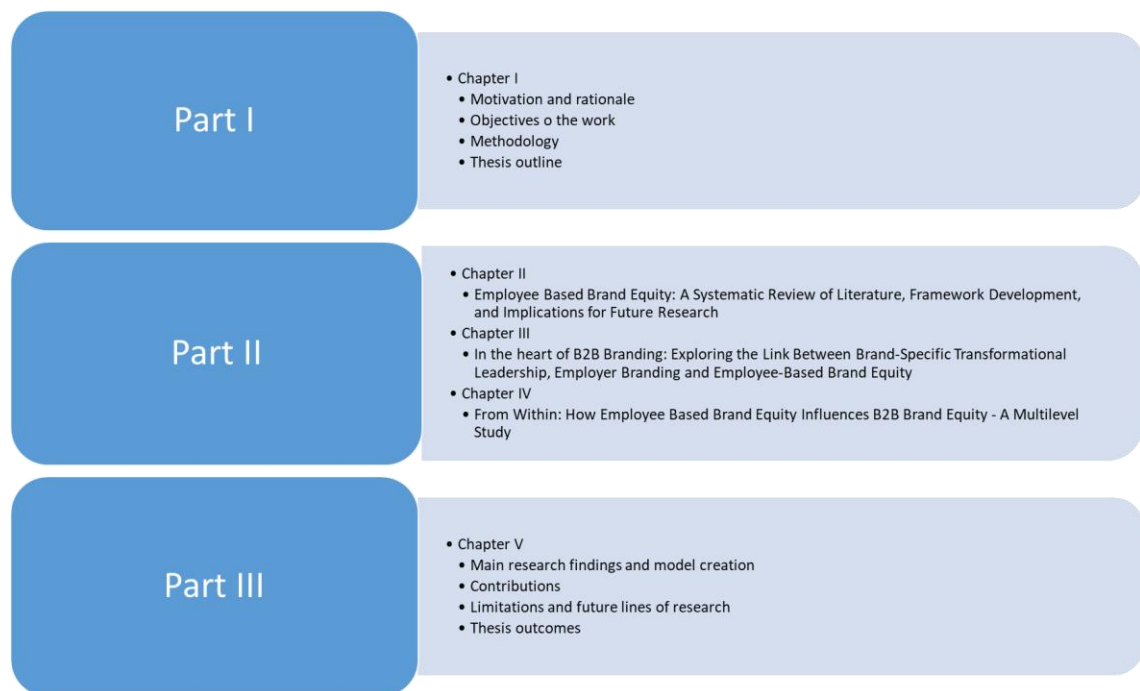


Figure 3 - Thesis Outline

Source: Own Elaboration

PART II

CHAPTER 2 – Employee-Based Brand Equity: A Systematic Review of Literature, Framework Development, and Implications for Future Research

Abstract:

Purpose: Through a systematic literature review, this paper endeavors to present a thorough historical perspective on the evolution of Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE), offering a comprehensive understanding of its development. The study explores the general model, causes, and effects of EBBE, as well as the role of culture, leadership, and brand management in building EBBE. The paper proposes an integrative framework to understand the interrelationships between the various dimensions of EBBE and offers practical guidelines for future research and the business world.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper employs a systematic literature review approach to analyze and synthesize 30 studies on EBBE retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science. The analysis involves a thematic and content-based examination of the literature, which is organized into three thematic groups.

Findings: The review highlights the importance of EBBE as a driver of organizational performance and success. The paper identifies the evolution of the major themes, trends, and debates in the literature and suggests areas for future research. It underscores the need for more qualitative, multi-level, and longitudinal research on EBBE, as well as the exploration of the links between EBBE and other forms of brand equity.

Originality/value: This paper is one of the first systematic literature reviews of EBBE, offering a comprehensive and integrated view of the existing literature, since the beginning of this concept. The paper's originality lies in its proposed integrative framework that captures the interrelationships between the various dimensions of EBBE and provides practical guidelines for future research and the business world.

Keywords: *Employee-Based Brand Equity; Internal Brand Management; Brand Equity; Systematic Literature Review*

2.1.Introduction

Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) has become a popular topic of research in recent years, with an increasing number of studies exploring its significance and impact on businesses. Despite the growing interest in the topic of EBBE, there remains a significant gap in the understanding of this concept. While numerous authors have made valuable contributions by exploring various aspects of EBBE, such as new variables, dimensions, and connections, a historical view and an integrated understanding that connects all of these findings, has yet to be achieved (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Mavuso et al., 2020; Sarangal, 2018; N. T. Tavassoli et al., 2014). Although individual studies have shed light on specific components of EBBE, it was missing a single study that synthesizes and consolidates all of this knowledge into a unified framework, and that reveals the evolution of this concept. This poses a challenge for both researchers and practitioners who seek a cohesive understanding of the mechanisms, antecedents, and outcomes of EBBE.

This article aims to address this gap by providing a systematic literature review of EBBE, identifying its evolution, key themes, and debates, and proposing an integrative framework for understanding the interplay between various dimensions of EBBE. Additionally, this article provides practical guidelines for businesses looking to enhance their EBBE.

The concept of "brand" has garnered considerable attention from scholars over the years, resulting in a multitude of definitions and making it a central subject of investigation (Aaker, 1996a; Keller, 1993, 1998; Kotler, 1991). A brand can be defined as a symbol or a name, as a product, or as "a means of symbolic framing for utilitarian and non-utilitarian values" (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007, p.364). In other words, an organization's brand is a set of symbolic, functional, and emotional benefits that are very difficult for competitors to replicate and that lead to organizational sustainability (King & Grace, 2010).

Throughout the past decades, there have been many efforts by professionals and academics to build strong brands that provide companies with a definitive competitive advantage (H. Kim et al., 2003). Brand equity can be perceived as the measure of such efforts and has emerged as one of the most important marketing concepts for the first time in the 1980s (Bravo Gil et al., 2007). Brand equity has been conceptualized as the intrinsic value that a brand adds to a tangible product or service (Fetscherin & Toncar, 2009).

Until very recently, brand equity was only observed from a financial or consumer perspective. Proponents of the financial perspective define brand equity as the total value of a brand when it is sold or included in a balance sheet (Atilgan et al., 2009). On the other hand, Customer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) represents the consumer perspective and can be analyzed as the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to brand marketing (Keller, 1998).

High levels of brand equity result in organizations having characteristics such as higher brand loyalty, brand awareness, positive customer perceptions and feelings, decreased price sensitivity, decreased financial and psychological risks, perceived quality, credibility, and financial gains such as increased market share (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006a; DuBois Gelb & Rangarajan, 2014; Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006). However, brands only become strong when the communicated brand promise is consistent with the delivered brand experience. And for this, there was a key stakeholder missing in the brand equity equation - the employee - as they play a central role in brand management. It is crucial that employees understand the organization's brand, what it means to them, and how it correlates with their roles and responsibilities, in order to deliver the brand promise (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006a).

In addition to the undeniable importance of employees in building the brand, organizations are increasingly encouraging their employees to act as brand ambassadors (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006b), as differentiating brand elements, as loyal elements, and with the role of brand endorsement (King et al., 2012).

In this way, internal brand management (IBM) gains greater prominence (King & Grace, 2009, 2010). When we look at brand equity from the consumer's point of view, the organization wants to promote long-term consumption behavior. In the case of an employee, the behavior is work-related, focused on fulfilling the brand promise.

EBBE can be seen as the differentiating effect that brand knowledge has on an employee's response to their work environment and requires translating the brand identity in a way that is meaningful to the employee in the context of their roles and responsibilities (King et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2009, 2010). According to Ghose, (2009), EBBE refers to the level of motivation of an employee to work for the brand's vision, along with the company's support to achieve the desired goals. EBBE can also be seen as the result of a scenario where employees have a high level of brand knowledge in order to stimulate positive behaviors aligned with the organization's brand identity (Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2007). Another view points out that EBBE captures

the perceived added value that employees receive as a result of brand building efforts, resulting in an incremental effect of the brand on employee behavior (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010b). For Tavassoli et al., (2014), EBBE can be seen as the value that a brand provides to a company through its effects on employees' attitudes and behaviors. There is also a perspective that refers to EBBE as the added meaning that employees receive from the brand beyond their work and the company's reputation, resulting in positive or negative behavior towards the company (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015).

EBBE originates from the application of marketing principles to the field of human resource management, where employees are influenced by the company's image and have an impact on the company's identity. A measure of EBBE is considered a vital indicator of organizational efforts (King et al., 2012). Academics and professionals should broaden their thinking and actions on how brands create value, how marketing returns are measured, and how marketing should be involved in human resources and finance activities (N. T. Tavassoli et al., 2014).

Given the necessary relationship between the marketing and human resources areas, it is important to clarify the difference with the term employer branding. EBBE and internal brand management aim to engage employees with the brand in order to deliver the brand promise (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005). In contrast, employer branding focuses on promoting engagement among current and future employees to establish a perception that the organization is a great place to work (Lloyd, 2002).

The EBBE must be seen as a constant affective and cognitive route with employees (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a), influenced by a set of factors, such as openness, knowledge dissemination, role clarity, commitment to the brand, and information generation, that lead to various benefits such as brand citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction, intention to stay in the organization, and positive word-of-mouth (King & Grace, 2009, 2010).

In their article, King et al. (2012) validated the EBBE scale across three core dimensions: (1) brand loyalty, (2) brand-consistent behavior, and (3) brand endorsement. This is the most commonly used scale in the articles analyzed in this systematic literature review. Brand loyalty refers to employees' future intention to stay with the organization. Brand-consistent behavior refers to employees' non-prescribed behaviors that are consistent with the brand and organizational values. Brand endorsement measures the extent to which employees are willing to share positive thoughts about the organization (brand) with others (King et al., 2012; Poulis & Wisker, 2016).

Since its emergence in 2009, the concept of EBBE has evolved, with the academic world focusing on analyzing, understanding, and measuring its model, causes, and effects, leading to the growth of this topic and its more integrated and holistic interpretation. So far, no systematic literature review has been found on EBBE to determine what is known about this recent field of research.

When reading this study, it is possible to discover the following elements: a description of the methodology employed in this systematic literature review, a bibliometric analysis of the considered articles, an analysis of the articles organized by thematic groups, the research agenda, the integrative framework, and finally, the conclusion of the study. The conclusion includes implications for the business and academic communities, as well as a discussion of the article's limitations.

2.2 Method

This article is based on a systematic literature review to identify, organize, synthesize, and interpret the main findings of relevant studies on EBBE, as well as to present the evolution of this research field in recent years. Through this method, it is possible to identify the breadth of research that has been published, identify key themes and debates, and highlight limitations and suggestions for future research. The focus of this work is the analysis of studies developed by the scientific community, allowing the identification of three thematic groups: 1) General model, causes, and effects of EBBE; 2) The role of culture, leadership, and context in EBBE; 3) The role of brand management in EBBE. This systematic literature review followed the structure of the five steps proposed by Khan et al. (2003): (1) Identification of the research question; (2) Identification of relevant studies; (3) Assessment of study quality; (4) Analysis/summary of evidence; (5) Interpretation/presentation of results.

Regarding the sample, two scientific databases were used: Web of Science and SCOPUS in April'23 (See Figure 4). The search term "employee-based brand equity" was first searched in the "topic" area to include studies that included the term in the title, abstract or keywords. Subsequently, the search was restricted to document type "article, review article, early access" published in English and in the categories "management, business, economics" in the case of WoS, and in the categories "Business, Management and Accounting; Social Sciences; Economics, Econometrics and Finance" in the case of SCOPUS. The same procedure was repeated with the term "employee brand equity".

Based on these criteria and steps, 30 articles were collected, with duplicates removed from both databases.

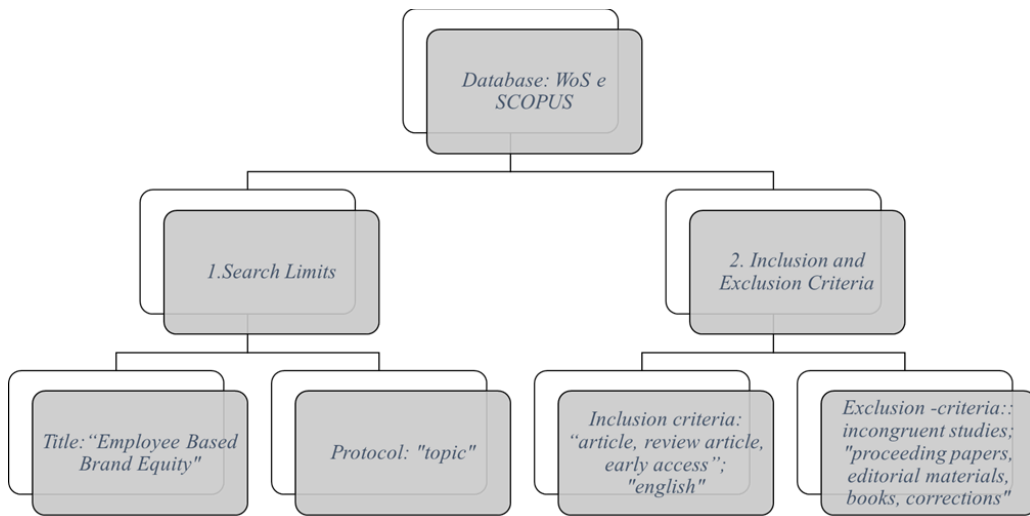


Figure 4 - Criteria of Sample Selection

Source: Own Elaboration

After collecting the articles, in order to find the clusters and proceed with the coding of the articles, it was used the approach proposed by Denyer and Tranfield, (2009) and Sarka and Ipsen, (2017) . A summary of the information contained in each article was developed in terms of descriptive, methodological, and thematic categories. For the thematic analysis, a more inductive approach was adopted, which analyzed and mapped the research discussion. Themes were extracted from the literature, grouped, and eventually synthesized into analytical themes (Thomas & Angela Harden, 2008). The aim was to identify the main predictors, mediators, and strategies to adopt. Two authors independently coded the data to ensure reliability between coders (Cho, 2008). Where viewpoints differed, issues of disagreement were discussed between the authors until a resolution was reached. (Cho, 2008).

The 30 articles in the sample were divided into three thematic groups according to the theme addressed and their contribution to understanding EBBE. The three thematic groups found were: 1) Model, general causes, and effects of EBBE; 2) The role of culture, leadership, and context in EBBE; 3) The role of brand management in EBBE (Table 3). It should be noted that the division of articles by content aimed to facilitate the understanding of each one's contribution to EBBE and not to restrict its analysis.

Table 3 - Thematic Groups

Thematic Groups	Nº Articles	Authors of each Thematic Group
Model, general causes, and effects of EBBE	15	(King & Grace, 2009) (King & Grace, 2010) (Hanaysha & Al-Shaikh, 2021) (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020) (Pitt et al., 2019) (Tavassoli et al., 2014) (Duh & Uford, 2019) (Mumtaz Awan & Wang, 2018) (Smith et al., 2021) (Altaf et al., 2019) (Altaf et al., 2017) (Sanuri & Mokhtar, 2018) (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018) (Altaf et al., 2022) (Hesse et al., 2022)
The role of culture, leadership, and context in EBBE	7	(Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021) (Mavuso et al., 2020) (Lee et al., 2020) (Nogueira et al., 2020) (Wisker & Kwiatek, 2019) (Poulis & Wisker, 2016) (Wallace & de Chernatony, 2011)
The role of brand management in EBBE	8	(Liu et al., 2020) (Deepa & Baral, 2021) (Kristanti, 2017) (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015) (Xiong et al., 2013) (Sarangal, 2018) (Huang & Lai, 2021) (Erkmen, 2018)

Source: Own Elaboration

2.3 Sample description

From the extracted sample, it is possible to perceive that the EBBE theme is recent, having gained importance in recent years (Figure 5). Literature has already recognized that brands and human capital constitute the most important assets of companies and that the development of these assets is imperative in the current context for marketing and human resources professionals (Aaker, 1991; de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006a; King & Grace, 2010; Poulis & Wisker, 2016). Thus, the relevance of the present theme is undeniable, and there has been a growing number of publications, especially in the last five years.

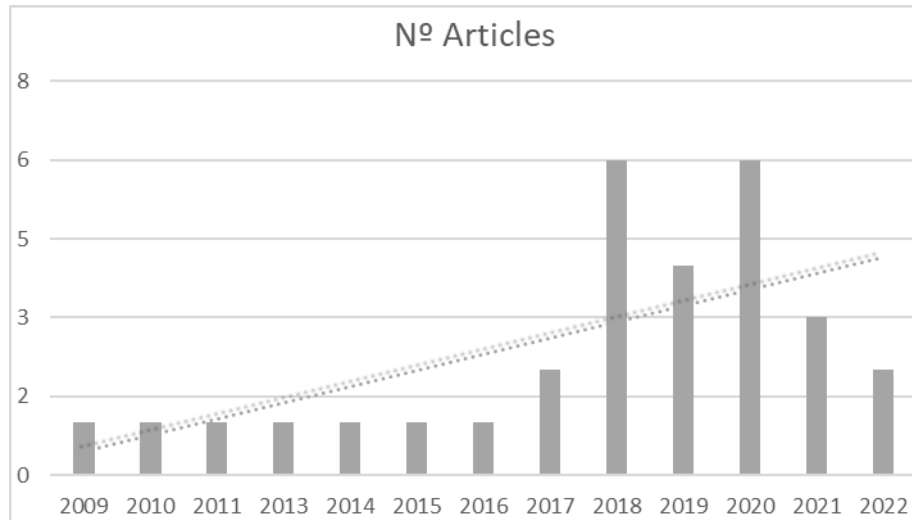


Figure 5 - Evolution of the Number of Publications

Source: Own Elaboration

Through Figure 2, which reflects the 30 extracted articles, it is possible to determine that the first article dates back to 2009, demonstrating the recent interest in the topic. The year with the highest number of publications was 2018 and 2020, each with a total of six articles.

In addition to the recent interest in the topic, it is evident that there is a multidisciplinary interest. The 30 articles in the sample are published in 28 international journals. Most of the journals focus on the themes of marketing and management.

Table 4 - Number of Articles by Methodology

Methodology	Nº Articles
Theoretical	1
Quantitative	25
Mixed	1
Qualitative	3

Source: Own Elaboration

Regarding the methodologies used in the studied articles, it is noticeable that they are mostly quantitative, representing more than 80% of the sample (see Table 4).

2.4 Thematic Groups

2.4.1 Theme Group 1 - Model, Causes and General Effects of EBBE

Fifteen articles were analyzed in this thematic group, of which thirteen are quantitative, one is qualitative, and one is theoretical, which was the first article found on the subject under study. The main objectives of the first thematic group are to analyze the birth of the EBBE concept, its model, evolution as well as its main causes and effects.

The concept of EBBE emerged in 2009 in an article that introduced the term as a third perspective on brand equity. In this first article, the authors shared a framework with the dimensions of EBBE: 1) internal brand management (generation of information; dissemination of knowledge; openness and human factor); 2) effects of brand knowledge (clarity in function and commitment to the brand); 3) benefits (brand citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction, intention to stay in the organization, positive word of mouth). For the authors, the desire to build EBBE is embedded in the vision that IBM's (internal brand management) efforts bring benefits to the organization, which ultimately contributes to organizational effectiveness and success. Thus, the authors for the first time positioned EBBE as a predecessor to Customer Based Brand Equity and Financial Brand Equity (King & Grace, 2009). In the following year, the same authors empirically tested the EBBE model, and the results provided empirical validation for the model presented in 2009. The EBBE model reinforces the importance of IBM and the human factor and proposes that employees who understand how to fulfill the brand promise (clarity of function) and maintain a form of loyalty to the organization (commitment to the brand) will, through their attitudes and behaviors, contribute to a set of organizational benefits (EBBE benefits). Thus, the authors suggest that marketing professionals need to pay more attention to IBM (factors such as openness, the "H" factor, and brand commitment) to facilitate cognitive reactions (e.g., information generation, knowledge dissemination, and role clarity) that lead to shared organizational benefits (King & Grace, 2010).

In 2014, Tavassoli et al., (2014) complemented the EBBE view and empirically demonstrated its importance in executive compensation as an additional benefit. Executives value being associated with strong brands and therefore accept substantially lower salaries in companies that possess such brands. The research by these authors emphasizes that EBBE, in addition to supporting areas such as recruitment, can be a means for organizations to increase their profits through cost reductions, making it possible for companies to employ key people more affordably.

In 2018, it was time to test King & Grace's model in a culturally different environment. Based on data from China, the results show that openness, knowledge dissemination,

role clarity, and brand commitment have significant direct or indirect effects on EBBE, and information generation has a significant peripheral indirect effect on EBBE. It is once again proven that major brands need to manage EBBE to achieve better financial performance (Mumtaz Awan & Wang, 2018).

Research has been conducted that strongly links EBBE to brand engagement, even reflected in employee behavior on social networks such as Glassdoor and Instagram (Pitt et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2021). Recent research also demonstrates the importance of brand co-creation on social media by employees and its positive impact on EBBE (Hesse et al., 2022). From a co-creative perspective, each social media activity undertaken by an employee has the potential to serve as a valuable contribution to a brand's equity (Hesse et al., 2022). Concurrently, employees are gaining increasing empowerment to express their opinions on employer review sites and share work-related content on popular social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok (Smith et al., 2021).

Some studies have also found that when employees understand their roles, have a solid understanding of their brand strength, and are committed to fulfilling the brand promise (i.e. positive EBBE), it leads to customers being willing to pay more for the services they receive (in this case associated with the banking sector), increasing brand preference. Therefore, CBBE needs to be supported by EBBE (Duh & Uford, 2019). In the context of the customer perspective, it has been proven that the dimensions of customer relationship management (CRM) have a positive impact on EBBE. Through customer relationship management, employees can gain important insights into customers' needs and expectations and continue to serve them in the best way possible, especially when they have strong connections with the brand and receive positive feedback from management (Hanaysha & Al-Shaikh, 2021).

Several studies have been conducted in the Islamic banking sector. These studies show that employee brand commitment mediates the relationship between openness and EBBE, while brand role clarity does not have a mediating role (Altaf et al., 2019). Furthermore, the cognitive and affective feelings of employees towards the brand are important in EBBE (Altaf et al., 2017), and the understanding of the brand and the psychological ownership of the brand play a mediating role in the relationship between brand empowerment and EBBE (Sanuri & Mokhtar, 2018; Xiong et al., 2013). Employee commitment to the brand strengthens the relationship between brand role clarity and EBBE (Altaf et al., 2022).

In 2020, an integrated model of antecedents and consequences of EBBE was also tested. The model presented by Boukis & Christodoulides, (2020) distinguishes a cognitive route and an affective route through two concepts: brand knowledge and brand identification. The study complements previous research by examining how employees' perceptions of their leadership roles impact EBBE. The evidence showed that leadership's role in the brand increases EBBE and that employees' cognitive and affective response to the brand is one of the main causes of EBBE. Brand knowledge is a strong predictor of EBBE, so promoting this knowledge should be one of the strategic priorities of organizations. However, it is also necessary to work on the affective route. In addition, the authors contribute to the fact that EBBE has a significant impact on the internal dissemination of the brand by colleagues, as well as being an important cause for customer orientation.

As visible through the articles in this thematic group, EBBE is a dynamic concept with much to explore. The main causes of EBBE are cognitive and affective, which lead to positive behaviors and attitudes of employees, contributing to customer-based brand equity (CBBE) and financial value creation for organizations.

2.4.2 Theme Group 2: The Role of Culture, Leadership and Context in EBBE

Seven articles were analyzed within this thematic group, consisting of one mixed methods study, one qualitative study, and five quantitative studies. These studies collectively demonstrate the significant influence of culture, context, and leadership on EBBE.

Culture encompasses the values, beliefs, and behaviors of employees and explains the organizational functioning (Deshpande & Webster, 1989 as cited in Mavuso et al., 2020). Mavuso et al., (2020) conducted a study in which they found that the four dimensions of organizational culture, namely involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission, were positively and significantly related to EBBE. The study results offer evidence-based recommendations to prioritize EBBE and leverage organizational culture to achieve brand equity. From a business standpoint, this study indicates that for organizations to achieve competitiveness through brand equity, it is important to focus on dimensions of organizational culture. Wallace & de Chernatony, (2011) also conducted a qualitative

study that allowed them to examine the influence of service company culture on the interpretation of brand role and the development and implementation of brand values. They quickly realized that culture is closely linked with these factors and suggested a model presented as a "hierarchy of change." The model identifies that in all cultural contexts, brand values must be created from the bottom up, based on consultation among all, regardless of seniority. To incorporate an appropriate set of values, senior managers should consider the brand as an "experience" rather than a "product plus" and ensure that brand champions are consistent in their interpretation of the brand. In their model, the authors recommend that frontline employees be directly involved in the continuous development and dissemination of brand values.

The role of leadership in branding is a crucial target for analysis in EBBE. It all starts with the specific brand leadership theory, developed by Morhart et al., (2009) through a combination of self-determination theory, social identity theory, and brand construction theory, which emphasizes that brand values and identity should be internalized in employees by leaders of a company (as cited in Lee et al., 2020). Leadership can occur in two forms: transactional (TRL) and transformational (TFL). TFL refers to the leadership style that motivates followers to act as ambassadors for the corporate brand, appealing to their personal values and beliefs. TRL refers to the leadership style that motivates followers to act as ambassadors for the corporate brand, using a logic of contingency and basic needs of employees as an appeal (Morhart et al., 2009 as cited in Lee et al., 2020). In the study conducted by Lee et al. (2020), the results imply that both TFL and TRL require the mediation of person-job fit and person-group fit to influence EBBE, which in turn influences brand equity. On the other hand, the study by Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., (2021) examines the role of TRL in implementing the new approach to brand building behaviors (BBBs) and EBBE. This study revealed that TRL is important for employees to exhibit BBBs. The results show that TRL affects participation and retention positively and significantly. In addition, the variables of participation, in-role brand building behavior (IRBBB), and retention have a positive and significant effect on EBBE. However, no significant relationship was found between TRL and IRBBB. By implementing TRL, leaders can see more employee participation in brand experiences, loyalty, and retention in the company. However, alongside transactional leadership, the transformational dimension in brand behavior is increasingly relevant, so further studies on TFL may be welcome.

Poulis & Wisker (2016) explored how EBBE and perceived environmental uncertainty (PEU) affect company performance. Of the six PEU hypotheses related to EBBE, four

hypotheses received strong statistical support: the effect of perceived macroeconomic uncertainties, the effect of perceived resources and service uncertainties, the effect of perceived product market and demand uncertainties, and the effect of perceived competition uncertainties. Thus, EBBE cannot be analyzed without taking the existing context into account. In the case of Wisker & Kwiatek, (2019), the results of their study showed that EBBE partially mediates the relationship between environmental orientation and organizational performance. The study observed a positive effect of environmental orientation on EBBE. Therefore, the study suggests that hoteliers need to be environmentally sensitive in order to attract, recruit, and retain worthy employees to achieve better business results. Lastly, we present the study by Nogueira et al., (2020), which explores EBBE in a different context, the context of volunteering. The findings of this study reinforced the primary role played by job clarity and commitment to the brand in engaging volunteers with their brand, which affects their overall satisfaction and motivation to remain in the organization.

Through this thematic group, it is possible to observe that culture, the role of leadership in the brand, environmental orientation, and organizational contexts must be taken into account in the analysis of EBBE.

2.4.3 Theme Group 3: The Role of Brand Management in EBBE

Eight articles were analyzed within this thematic group, seven of which are quantitative and one is qualitative. This thematic group aims to delve deeper into the brand management efforts that companies have to make and which aspects of the brand they should be aware of to achieve EBBE and, consequently, CBBE and financial performance.

A study by Xiong et al., (2013) shows that employees' brand attitude and behavior are influenced by different brand understanding factors. Relational factors (perceived brand importance to the employee and relevance of the brand role) are the main antecedents of employee brand commitment. The results suggest that while perceived brand knowledge can contribute to EBBE, employees must see the brand as significant and relevant to embrace their role as brand ambassadors. Berger-Remy & Michel, (2015) also suggest that brands, through the meaning they convey or the identity they embody, can trigger employee attitudes and behaviors - whether positive (pride, work motivation, positive word-of-mouth) or negative (criticism, disengagement from the company). To increase EBBE, it is important to encourage employees to embrace the brand, even

those who are not naturally in contact with the brand in their profession. The authors suggest that the brand identity be formalized among employees to give them the means to experience the brand from a moral, psychological, and physical perspective. It is necessary to identify, develop, and sustain aspects of the brand that mean something to employees, providing direction, content, and sensations - more than simply transposing the relationship of customers with the brand. EBBE thus highlights the importance of brand management in building meaning in a social context (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015). Effective integrated communication is crucial in achieving an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) that aligns with the organization's brand promise, and can therefore benefit Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE). When employees experience coordination and consistency in brand communication, they perceive that the psychological contract (in terms of EVP attributes) is being fulfilled, resulting in positive behaviors and attitudes towards the brand, leading to EBBE benefits (Deepa & Baral, 2021).

Liu et al., (2020) also emphasizes the importance of working on the brand identity (set of associations the brand wants to create and maintain), as it positively affects the internalization of the brand by employees, leading to a positive EBBE. Internalizing the brand refers to effectively communicating the brand to employees, conveying its relevance and value. Sarangal, (2018) reflects on the importance of internal marketing practices for EBBE. From the perspective of internal marketing, employees should be seen as customers and trained, motivated, and satisfied to build a positive internal customer. Thus, focusing on internal marketing activities will lead to higher EBBE and, consequently, support the achievement of organizational strategic objectives.

Kristanti, (2017) reinforces the strategic role of branding in the corporate competitive advantage of organizations and studies the relationship between corporate brand personality and sustainable brand value, finding that corporate brand personality provides a good explanation of the influence of sustainable brand value. Corporate brand personality is defined as a first-order latent construct, where employees are required to express a high degree of identification in order to score high on sustainable brand value and emerge as brand champions.

Huang & Lai, (2021) highlight that the establishment of EBBE can be achieved through internal branding (IB) management in medical service environments, and has positive effects on employees' organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and job performance (JP). In Erkmen, (2018) research, it is demonstrated that internal communication increases brand knowledge and role clarity, while external communication and

employees' brand experience positively affect employees' brand commitment. The construction of EBBE is an internal process that involves various mechanisms, each with a distinct role in building the brand.

Through this thematic group, the importance of companies investing in internal brand management activities, brand identity, and internal marketing is made clear in order to achieve all the benefits of EBBE.

2.5. Research agenda & framework

After a deep examination of the contributions of the studies analyzed in this systematic literature review, the main suggestions for future research will be summarized by thematic group.

Through an analysis of the research suggestions present in the articles of the first thematic group - General Model, Causes and Effects of EBBE - it is possible to verify that this is still a new field of research with much to explore.

The authors recommend testing the EBBE model in more countries, regions, and industry sectors, as research has mainly focused on service companies. Several authors suggest research in industrial and business-to-business environments. Testing EBBE in B2B and industrial businesses is of significant importance for several reasons. Firstly, B2B companies operate within unique market dynamics, where these organizations often engage in long-term relationships and partnerships with other businesses, relying heavily on trust, credibility, and reputation. Secondly, in B2B environments employees, as representatives of their organizations, play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining relationships with clients, influencing their perceptions of the brand and fostering long-term loyalty. Additionally, B2B businesses often operate in niche markets with specialized products or services. In these industries, brand differentiation and value proposition are key factors in achieving a competitive advantage. Overall, testing EBBE in B2B and industrial businesses allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how employee perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors shape brand equity in these unique contexts. The findings can inform strategic decision-making, marketing efforts, and employee engagement initiatives, ultimately leading to enhanced brand performance and competitive advantage in B2B and industrial markets (Altaf et al., 2022; King & Grace, 2009; Uford & Duh, 2021).

It is also noticeable that there is a suggestion for the use of different methodologies. More than 80% of the articles in this sample are quantitative, which indicates the need for more qualitative research, more case studies, and more longitudinal research for a deeper understanding of the topic.

The recommendations for future research also include multigroup analysis across different sectors and types of companies, investigating antecedents and behavioral outcomes in different contexts, conducting comparative studies across different countries, and replicating the study in other industries.

This thematic group also reveals the need to investigate in more detail the relationship between EBBE and CBBE and FBBE. Investigating the relationship between them is crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of brand performance and making informed strategic decisions. It helps organizations ensure brand consistency, foster customer loyalty and advocacy, improve financial performance, and gain a competitive advantage. The relationship between these variables highlights the importance of aligning employees with the brand, creating positive customer experiences, and measuring the impact of employee branding initiatives on financial outcomes (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; N. T. Tavassoli et al., 2014).

In the articles of the second thematic group - the Role of Culture, Leadership and Context in EBBE - there are still suggestions for more qualitative and longitudinal research to advance this field. These articles also reinforce the importance of analyzing the impact of EBBE on the company's financial performance. By conducting longitudinal research, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the temporal dynamics and causal relationships between EBBE, cultural factors, leadership practices, and organizational context. These studies can help identify the long-term effects of specific interventions, initiatives, or changes in these factors on the development and sustainability of EBBE (Lee et al., 2020; Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021).

One of the prominent themes within the research on Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) is the role of brand leadership, particularly Transformational Leadership (TRL) or Transactional Leadership (TFL), and its impact on EBBE. To further advance this field, future research could adopt a more diversified approach to studying leadership styles, such as employing comprehensive 360-degree self-assessment methods. Moreover, researchers can consider incorporating additional leadership variables to explore the relationships and mediating effects between employees and brand equity, providing a more comprehensive contribution to the existing body of research. By exploring these

aspects, we can enhance our understanding of how different leadership styles and variables impact EBBE and contribute to the overall brand management efforts within organizations (Lee et al., 2020; Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021).

Further analysis of Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) in diverse social contexts and exploration of Volunteer-Based Brand Equity (VBBE) are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Research should investigate differences among volunteers from various social backgrounds, utilizing a broader and more comprehensive panel of experts. The use of the Delphi method on a larger scale can provide valuable insights into the dimensions of EBBE in the context of formal volunteering. Additionally, it is advised to examine variables such as coordination/management roles, volunteer tenure, and hours dedicated to volunteer activities, to assess their impact on VBBE (Nogueira et al., 2020).

The connection between organizational culture and brand values to EBBE can also be a theme that is more explored in future research. Investigating the connection between organizational culture and brand values to Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) is crucial for understanding how internal culture influences employee perceptions and behaviors towards the brand. This research can provide insights into developing strategies to align the organizational culture with brand values, strengthen employee engagement, and deliver a consistent brand experience. It can also shed light on the mechanisms through which culture impacts EBBE, such as leadership styles and communication channels. By fostering a positive culture that supports brand values, organizations can build customer trust, loyalty, and long-term brand equity (Mavuso et al., 2020; Wallace & de Chernatony, 2011).

Moving on to the suggestions given in the third thematic group – the Role of Brand Management in EBBE – we find again the suggestion of qualitative and longitudinal research exploring different countries and areas of activity. A multi-level research that encompasses companies, employees, and customers for a deeper understanding of EBBE and the effects of brand management is also suggested.

For the authors, it is relevant to understand how different employees react to brand stimuli and, for example, the impact of employee seniority. They also suggest analyzing the impact of internal marketing actions (formal and informal). These suggestions can be considered due to several reasons. Firstly, employees at different levels of seniority may have varying levels of familiarity and alignment with the brand, which can influence their perceptions and behaviors. Secondly, seniority can also affect the extent to which

employees have been exposed to internal marketing actions and initiatives, potentially influencing their engagement and understanding of the brand. Additionally, analyzing the impact of both formal and informal internal marketing actions provides insights into the effectiveness of different strategies in shaping employee perceptions and fostering brand alignment. By exploring these factors, organizations can develop targeted and tailored approaches to enhance EBBE and overall brand performance (Liu et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2013).

Through a critical analysis of the research profile and the themes extracted from this systematic literature review, it was possible to identify and summarize a set of future research opportunities. Table 5 highlights the main themes and research questions.

Table 5 - Research Questions Based on Themes and Gaps

Themes	Sub-themes	Research questions for future investigation
Causes and Effects of EBBE	Relationship with CBBE	What are the sources of CBBE and EBBE? What is the impact of EBBE on factors such as resistance to persuasive advertising from competitors and willingness of customers and employees to engage in positive word-of-mouth? How do fluctuations in EBBE impact CBBE? Which EBBE factors have the greatest influence on CBBE?
	EBBE in B2B companies	How does the EBBE model behave in B2B companies and with B2B employees?
	Relationship with FBBE	What is the impact of EBBE on FBBE? What is the effect of EBBE on organizational performance metrics, such as sales and customer satisfaction?
Culture, Leadership and Context in EBBE	Role of Leadership	How does TFL affect EBBE and CBBE? What type of leadership has a greater impact on EBBE – TFL or TRL? How does leadership mediate the relationship of employees with the brand? How does TFL impact employees' adoption of brand values?
	Role of Culture	Does the adoption of values by employees directly influence EBBE?
	Role of Context	How do contextual factors such as trust and organizational prestige affect EBBE? How do employee characteristics affect EBBE? What is the impact of different social contexts on VBBE?
Role of Brand Management in EBBE	IBM & IM	What is the impact of IBM or IM initiatives on EBBE?
	Employer Branding	What is the impact of Employer Branding on EBBE?

Source: Own Elaboration

The analysis of the limitations found thus gives rise to a framework that can serve as a basis for a research agenda.

This structure emphasizes the various aspects of the theme that are worth exploring, based on the content analysis of the selected studies (figure 6).

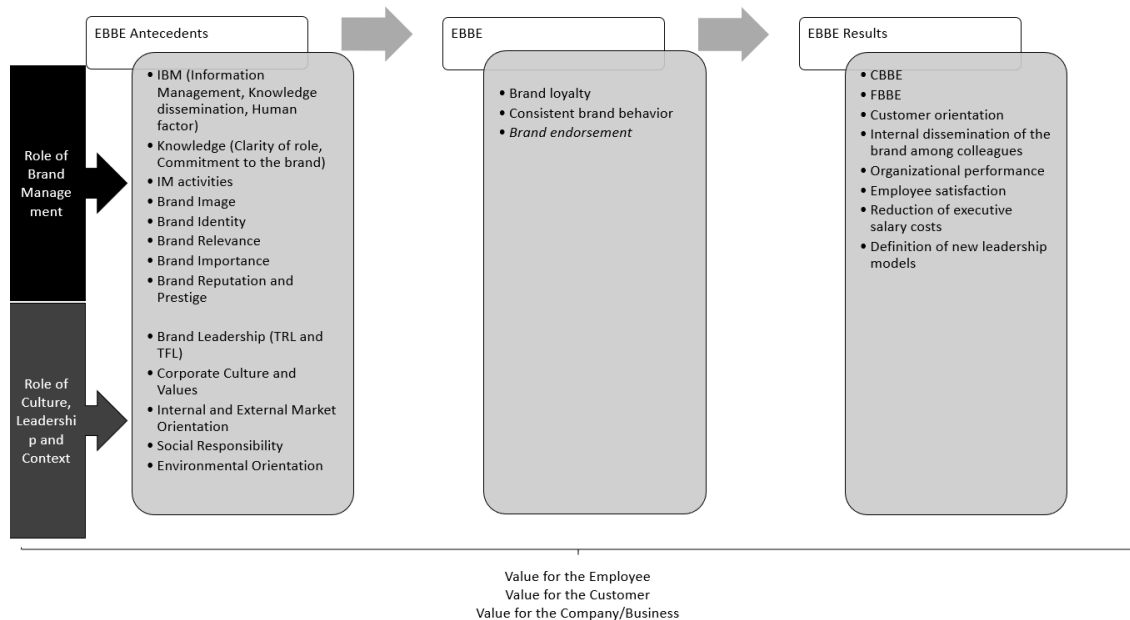


Figure 6 - EBBE Framework

Source: Own Elaboration

Through Figure 3, we can understand that the entire system of EBBE is a process that delivers value to the employee, the customer, and the company/business. As antecedents, it is possible to identify those related to leadership, culture, context, as well as those related to brand management itself. These antecedents will cause employees to have a set of positive behaviors and attitudes that make the brand promise delivered. Through EBBE, it is possible to achieve results such as CBBE and FBBE, among others.

This integrative structure of EBBE reveals the relevance of continuing research in this field in order to better understand the sources and consequences of EBBE, as well as how value is delivered to employees, customers, and the company throughout the process.

2.6. Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

The present systematic literature review on EBBE contributes to the literature through a comprehensive review of the state-of-the-art, an understanding of the evolution of the concept, and a deep exploration of its main areas, causes, and effects.

In order to investigate these main areas, a content analysis was conducted by thematic groups. The analysis of 30 articles resulted in three main thematic groups: 1) General model, causes, and effects of EBBE; 2) The role of culture, leadership, and context in EBBE; 3) The role of brand management in EBBE. In addition to the analysis of each of these thematic groups, this article contributes to the literature through its synthesis, creating an integrative structure of EBBE that lists its antecedents (whether in the order of brand management, culture, context, or leadership) as well as its results, where value is delivered to the employee, customer, and the company throughout the process (Figure 3). This structure also summarizes the evolution of this concept, considering the contribution of the articles found.

This study also demonstrates the increasing importance of EBBE for the academic and business world, since 2009. In fact, EBBE and brand equity are topics of real interest, since building, maintaining, and using brands to achieve a sustainable strategic advantage is a reality (Erdem et al., 1999). Therefore, marketing literature promotes a greater understanding of the impact of brand-building efforts to enrich future brand management practices (King et al., 2012). And to understand the impact of these efforts, it would be a mistake not to investigate the role of employees (King & Grace, 2009). Organizations are increasingly encouraging their employees to be their main ambassadors, so a measure of EBBE should be considered a vital indicator of organizational efforts (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006; King et al., 2012).

This article brings important implications for management and business practice, supporting companies in exploring the definitive and sustainable competitive advantage that characterizes Brand Equity. The focus on internal brand communication is clear. But how to communicate and demonstrate the brand? In this article, it is noticeable that it is not enough to copy what is done for customers. It is necessary to understand who the employees are and communicate the brand in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015). But in addition to the focus on the brand management area, as evidenced from the outset in the EBBE model (King & Grace, 2009), professionals should pay attention to their leaders and their role in transmitting brand values, as well as considering the organizational culture and context in which they operate. Only through the analysis and optimization of all these variables is it possible to achieve EBBE, and consequently, CBBE and financial performance.

In addition to the contributions to the business world, this article also provides guidance for the academic world. The main research gaps in this area were identified, and research questions were formulated to guide future studies. In addition to the need for more qualitative, multilevel, and longitudinal research, it is necessary to test the EBBE model in more countries, regions, and sectors, such as industry. Furthermore, it is important to investigate more deeply the connection between EBBE and CBBE, the connection between EBBE and FBBE, culture as a precursor to EBBE, the role of leadership in EBBE, the role of context in EBBE, the influence of employee personal characteristics on EBBE, as well as the best practices of IBM and MI that influence EBBE.

Despite the contributions of this study, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The main limitation is related to the sample used. Only articles from two scientific databases (SCOPUS and WoS) were considered, so it is recommended to broaden the databases in future reviews to analyze more articles on the subject.

Finally, it is worth noting that EBBE is a strategic factor for organizations, and marketers, managers, and human resources professionals should work together in a multidisciplinary and integrated way to achieve the long-awaited competitive advantage for organizations. Strong brands cannot exist if the brand promise is not fulfilled, and this can only be achieved through employee engagement, commitment, and satisfaction. Brand equity has only one way to start - internally. Therefore, it is necessary to develop and pay attention to areas such as brand management, leadership, culture, and context to achieve EBBE and, consequently, CBBE and financial performance.

CHAPTER 3 - In the heart of B2B Branding: Exploring the Link Between Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership, Employer Branding and Employee-Based Brand Equity

Abstract:

Purpose: This study examines the relationships between brand-specific transformational leadership (TFL), employer branding, and employee-based brand equity (EBBE) in the business-to-business (B2B) context. Additionally, the study investigates the mediating role of employer branding in the relationship between brand-specific TFL and EBBE, shedding light on the mechanisms through which brand-specific leaders impact EBBE via employer branding initiatives.

Design/methodology/approach: The study takes a quantitative approach. Data collection was conducted using a questionnaire in B2B service sectors. The PLS method was applied in Smart PLS (V. 3.0) to test the established relationships between constructs.

Findings: The findings reveal significant positive associations between brand-specific TFL and employer branding dimensions, as well as between employer branding and EBBE dimensions. The relationship between brand-specific TFL and EBBE is higher when mediated by employer branding.

Originality/value: This study contributes to theoretical understanding by advancing knowledge on the mechanisms driving EBBE within B2B firms. It offers practical insights for managers and researchers by highlighting the importance of leadership and employer branding strategies in enhancing EBBE in the B2B context.

Keywords: *Employee-Based Brand Equity; Employer Branding; Brand Specific Transformation Leadership; Social Identity Theory*

3.1 Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of business-to-business (B2B) markets, where direct interactions and complex negotiations underpin sales processes, the role of a company's employees becomes not merely operational but strategically pivotal (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). Employees play a key role in communicating and sustaining brand promises, acting as the living embodiments of brand values at the customer interface (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). However, while studies have covered consumer-oriented brand equity, there is a conspicuous dearth of focused research on how Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) develops in environments characterized by high product complexity and significant customer interaction, such as those found in B2B sectors (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Duh & Uford, 2019). Investigating EBBE in B2B sector can have the power to inform strategic decision-making, marketing efforts, and employee engagement initiatives, ultimately leading to enhanced brand performance and competitive advantage in B2B markets (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; King & Grace, 2009; Uford & Duh, 2021).

The concept of EBBE, introduced by King & Grace (2009), has emerged as a significant lever in enhancing brand performance and gaining competitive advantages. Despite this recognition, scholarly exploration particularly in the B2B context, where interpersonal relationships are crucial, remains underdeveloped (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Duh & Uford, 2019; King & Grace, 2009; Uford & Duh, 2021). This study seeks to fill this gap by extending the existing understanding of EBBE and examining the pivotal roles of brand-specific transformational leadership (TFL) and employer branding in cultivating a workforce that does not just understand the brand's values but embodies them in every customer interaction.

Our investigation is predicated on the understanding that in B2B settings, brand equity transcends traditional marketing strategies and intertwines deeply with personal selling and relationship management (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2004; Mudambi, 2002). Current literature vividly shows that EBBE significantly influences employees' commitment, and behavior (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; King & Grace, 2010; Poulis & Wisker, 2016; Wisker & Kwiatek, 2019). Understanding the factors that lead to EBBE is crucial for organizations aspiring to establish robust brand equity while fostering a dedicated and motivated workforce (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020). Previous studies have also highlighted the importance of studying the effects of employer branding and brand-specific TFL on EBBE. Deepa &

Baral, (2021) emphasize the need for future research to explore how brand-specific leaders contribute to co-creating and sharing the value of the employer brand and check how this contribution will affect the overall development of EBBE.

The concept of employer branding encompasses a package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employers and perceived by their employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017). Brand-focused leaders serve as role models who communicate in ways that resonate with the intended brand identity, effectively translating the brand's promise and perceptions, into tangible actions (Chiang et al., 2020; Joyce Stuart, 2013; Morhart et al., 2009). The mediating function of employer branding in the connection between brand-specific TFL and EBBE in B2B context has gained growing significance and needs scholarly attention (Deepa & Baral, 2021).

In this light, the purpose of this study is to build a comprehensive conceptual framework for the factors contributing to EBBE in a B2B setting. Our study aims to examine the effects of brand-specific TFL on EBBE and delve into the mediating role of employer branding, following the social identity theory framework. Given the strategic importance of EBBE in driving sustainable competitive advantages, our research not only responds to calls for greater scholarly attention in the B2B markets (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Duh & Uford, 2019; King & Grace, 2009; Uford & Duh, 2021) but also aims to offer practical insights for businesses striving to optimize their brand equity. This paper promises to advance the theoretical framework of EBBE, provide empirical insights into its antecedents, and delineate actionable strategies for fostering a brand-aligned, motivated workforce in B2B settings. In the sections that follow, we will review relevant literature, present our conceptual model, outline our research method, discuss our findings, and conclude by acknowledging limitations and proposing avenues for future research.

3.2. Literature Review

Social Identity Theory

This study is based on the foundations of the social identity theory. The theory of social identity has been applied over time in various contexts, from consumer psychology to mass communication. It proves to be one of the fundamental theories of social psychology, aiming to explain the cognitive, interactive, and social perspectives of a group (Mavuso et al., 2020). According to the original definition by Tajfel, (1978), social

identity is the part of an individual's self-concept that derives from their knowledge of being a member of a social group.

Tajfel, (1978) proposed that the groups to which people belong are an important source of pride and self-esteem. Ashforth & Mael, (1989) propose that individuals tend to align their behaviors with their self-identities, benefiting the institutions associated with those identities, such as the corporate brand. These identity-congruent behaviors yield advantages like reduced turnover, support within role expectations, and various extra-role activities (Morhart et al., 2009).

Social identity theory is important for the present study, as it can explain the reasons behind employees' decisions to commit to a brand (Mavuso et al., 2020). Within this context, social identity theory serves as a foundational framework for conceptualizing employees as brand ambassadors and exploring their relationship with concepts like leadership and employer branding.

Employee-Based Brand Equity

As primary stakeholders of a brand, employees' work experiences and interactions with the organization significantly shape their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward the brand (Hernández-Díaz et al., 2017; King & Grace, 2009). For this reason, employees need to understand the organization's brand, its significance to them, and its alignment with their roles and responsibilities, enabling them to effectively deliver the brand promise (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006). Just as brand equity aims to promote long-term consumption behavior among consumers, EBBE focuses on guiding employees' work-related behavior, driven by fulfilling the brand promise.

King et al., (2012) validated the EBBE scale across three dimensions: brand loyalty, which measures employees' intention to stay with the organization in the future; brand-consistent behavior, referring to employees' non-prescribed behaviors aligned with the brand and organizational values; and brand endorsement, gauging employees' willingness to share positive thoughts about the organization with others (King et al., 2012; Poulis & Wisker, 2016).

EBBE is shaped by various factors and influences the attitudes and behaviors of employees toward the brand they represent. Prior studies mainly address employees' psychological perceptions, organizational culture, leadership styles, brand understanding factors, and the impact of internal branding on EBBE (Boukis &

Christodoulides, 2020; Deepa & Baral, 2021; King & Grace, 2009; Liu et al., 2020; Sarangal, 2018).

Brand-specific transformational leadership and EBBE

The theory of brand-specific leadership was developed by Morhart et al., (2009), emphasizing that brand values and brand role identity should be internalized in employees by leaders of an organization. The authors developed this concept with an awareness that the task of getting employees to construct and strengthen an organization's brand image (i.e., act as ambassadors) is a significant challenge for companies in various sectors (Morhart et al., 2009).

Brand-specific TFL refers to a leadership style that motivates followers to act as ambassadors of the corporate brand, appealing to their values and beliefs. TFL encompasses charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Morhart et al., 2009).

The impact of brand-specific TFL on employees' attitudes and behaviors remains relatively under-explored (Chiang et al., 2020). In the study conducted by Lee et al., (2020), the results highlight that brand-specific TFL requires the mediation of perceived job fit and perceived group fit to influence EBBE, subsequently impacting brand value. Chiang et al., (2020) also reveal a significant connection between brand-specific TFL and frontline employees' brand commitment, which leads to the emergence of brand citizenship behaviors (BCBs).

To enhance EBBE, it is suggested that leaders first articulate a compelling brand vision and mission and reinforce the core brand values. Secondly, leaders should communicate the vision, mission, and values to their employees to shape their brand-related attitudes and behaviors. Thirdly, leaders must lead by example and guide employees to behave in line with the brand promise (Chiang et al., 2020).

The connection between leadership actions and employees' brand-aligned behavior finds its foundation in social identity theory (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020). When leaders effectively communicate the organization's brand values, employees are more likely to align themselves with the organization's brand identity, ultimately boosting their levels of brand identification (Hodges & Martin, 2012).

Based on these observations, the subsequent hypothesis is crafted:

H1. Brand-specific TFL is positively related to EBBE.

Brand-specific TFL and employer branding dimensions

Employer branding is a strategic process of branding that aims to create, negotiate, and establish sustainable relationships between an organization and its employees (Kryger Aggerholm et al., 2011). To achieve its objectives, employer branding encompasses a mix of tangible and intangible benefits offered by an organization to attract and retain employees (Bussin & Mouton, 2019; Deepa & Baral, 2021; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017).

Employer branding also encompasses a range of dimensions that collectively contribute to creating an attractive and compelling value proposition for employees. For Tanwar & Prasad, (2017) employer branding is composed by: 1) healthy work environment; 2) training and development; 3) personal/professional life balance; 4) ethics and corporate social responsibility; 5) remuneration and benefits.

The importance of top management's leadership in internal branding, and its indirect impact on employees' emotional attachment to the brand, has been highlighted in previous studies (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020). Brand-oriented leaders serve as exemplars, aligning their communication with the desired brand identity and translating the brand's promise, known as the EVP, into tangible actions (Terglav et al., 2016).

Numerous studies have explored the influence of TFL on the dimensions of employer branding. Thaira Othman & Huthaifah Khrais, (2022) identified a robust positive correlation between TFL and both job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Likewise, Kohan et al., (2018) research revealed that TFL significantly contributes to fostering workplace friendships and a positive organizational climate (Sun et al., 2014; Zaccaro et al., 2001).

In the context of training and development, TFL has been recognized as a primary driver of employee learning and performance enhancement (Akdere & Egan, 2020; Crane & Hartwell, 2018). Leaders play a pivotal role in facilitating cognitive growth among their employees due to the substantial influence their actions exert on motivation, attitudes, and skill development (Bass, 2000; Morhart et al., 2009).

TFL has also been found to be instrumental in promoting work-life balance (Zakaria & Omar, 2016). Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, (2021) study further affirms the impact of TFL in reducing role ambiguity and fostering work-life balance. Existing literature posits that TFL and organizational learning contribute to the enhancement of work-life balance by stimulating intellectual growth, motivation, and self-confidence among organizational members (Gomes et al., 2021).

Leadership style stands as a crucial determinant impacting employee job performance. Furthermore, it guides the objectives pursued, potentially leading to benefits for employees and contributing to broader social and economic well-being for society (Manzoor et al., 2019). Previous research has identified essential attributes of TFL integral to Corporate Social Responsibility practices, including visionary qualities, inspirational leadership, and intellectual stimulation (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Pless et al., 2012).

Finally, TFL wields the capacity to influence how employees perceive the advantages of human capital. Additionally, they hold substantial potential to enhance these benefits through active engagement in the knowledge management process, fostering an organizational culture that promotes these benefits, and encouraging communication among the workforce (Birasnav et al., 2011). As a result, employees elevate their performance during their job duties, ultimately yielding a considerable return on investment from their workforce (Boerner et al., 2007).

Drawing from these observations, the ensuing hypotheses are formulated:

H2. Brand-specific TFL is positively related to employer branding.

H2a. Brand-specific TFL is positively related to a healthy work atmosphere.

H2b. Brand-specific TFL is positively related to training and development.

H2c. Brand-specific TFL is positively related to work-life balance.

H2d. Brand-specific TFL is positively related to ethics and corporate social responsibility.

H2e. Brand-specific TFL is positively related to compensation and benefits.

Employer branding and EBBE

Cultivating an appealing employer brand allows organizations to establish enduring and favorable bonds with their workforce, thereby augmenting their overall brand equity (Ahmad et al., 2020; Deepa & Baral, 2021). In this way, employer branding holds a pivotal position in fostering a constructive impact on EBBE, by forging a robust linkage between employees and the brand (Deepa & Baral, 2021; King & Grace, 2010). Deepa & Baral, (2021) proposal centers on the idea that employer branding acts in synergy with internal branding initiatives, fostering employees' willingness to invest their time and energy in advancing corporate objectives and cultivating EBBE.

By formalizing the brand identity for employees, organizations can enable them to connect with the brand on moral, psychological, and physical levels, extending beyond the effects of external advertising campaigns (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015). When an

organization fulfills its brand promise through its EVP, it can derive significant benefits in the form of EBBE (Deepa & Baral, 2021).

The link between employer branding and EBBE has also been explored in terms of employee brand loyalty and retention (Said et al., 2020). Research suggests that employees who are loyal to the organization's brand are more likely to stay with the company and spread positive word of mouth, ultimately influencing customer loyalty to the brand (Said et al., 2020).

Based on these observations, the following hypotheses are developed:

H3. Employer branding is positively related to EBBE.

H3a. Employer branding is positively related to brand endorsement.

H3b. Employer branding is positively related to brand allegiance.

H3c. Employer branding is positively related to brand consistent behavior.

The mediating role of employer branding

Deepa & Baral, (2021) emphasize the need for future research to explore how brand-specific leaders contribute to co-creating and sharing the value of the employer brand. This contribution ultimately plays a pivotal role in the overall development of EBBE. Sahu et al., (2018) findings suggest that leadership's relationship with psychological attachment is mediated by employer branding, highlighting the intermediary role that employer branding plays in influencing employees' psychological attachment to the organization. Chandra et al., (2023) further validate the mediating effect of employer branding. Their research demonstrates that TFL has a significant impact on employees' intention to stay, and this relationship is sequentially mediated by employer branding and organizational identification.

The literature supports the idea that employer branding can enhance and amplify the relationship between brand-specific TFL and EBBE. In this way, we consider the following hypothesis for our model (see Figure 7):

H4. Employer branding mediates the relationship between TFL, EBBE and its components (brand endorsement, brand allegiance, brand consistent behavior).

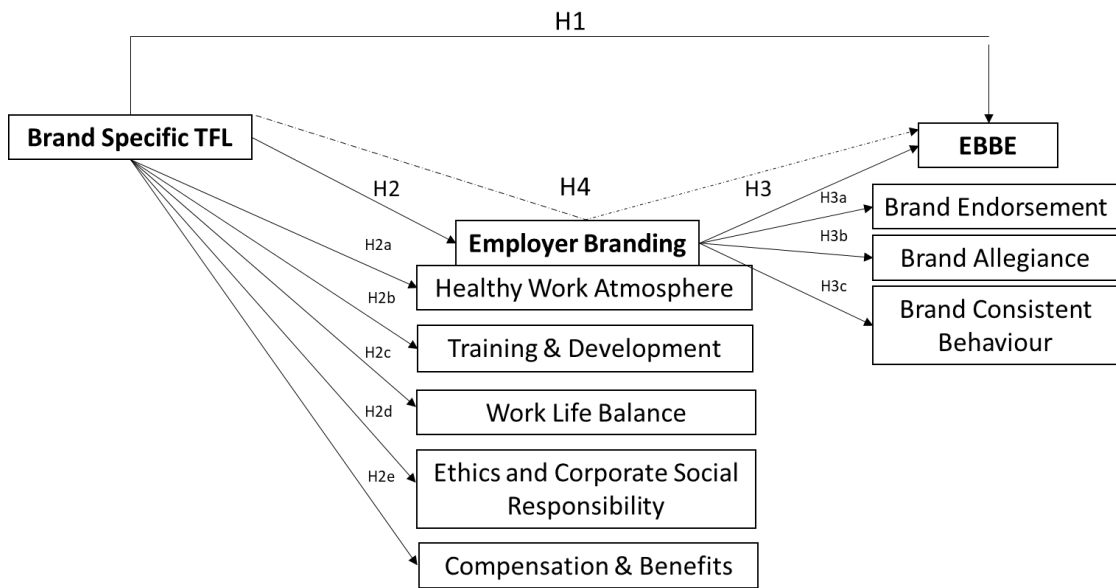


Figure 7 - Conceptual Model. Direct effects (□); Indirect effects (- - ->)

Source: Own Elaboration

3.3. Method

Measurement Scales

This study employed established and validated measurement scales from prior researchers to assess its constructs. EBBE was adopted from the study conducted by King et al., (2012). The measurement of employer branding drew from the multidimensional scale developed by Tanwar & Prasad, (2017). For the evaluation of brand-specific TFL, the scale by Morhart et al., (2009) was used. Following the previous studies, a five-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree was used.

Sampling and Data Collection

This research was conducted within the B2B services industry. Four Portuguese B2B companies, specializing in electronic products, waste management, fleet management, and cargo handling equipment services, participated in the study.

Data collection involved sharing the online survey with the HR leaders of these companies, who subsequently shared it with their employees' database via email, ensuring strict confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process. The survey was

administered in Portuguese and underwent a thorough review by a local proofreader for accuracy and quality.

After 936 questionnaires were administered, 491 employees completed the questionnaires, representing a 52% response rate. Regarding the demographic profile of the sample, 50.5% of the respondents are female, 30.2% of them have graduated, and 32.2% of the respondents are in the 41-50 age cohort (See Table 6).

Table 6 - Socio-demographic characterization of the participants

	Frequency (%)
Employees Gender	
Female	50,5%
Male	44,6%
Prefer not to say	4,9%
Employees Age	
30 or less	22%
31 to 40	27,1%
41 to 50	32,2%
51 to 60	15,9%
61 or more	2,9%
Employees Education	
6th grade	1,6%
9th grade	11,2%
High school	28,1%
Bachelor's degree	2,9%
Graduation	30,3%
Master's degree	8,4%
PhD	0,4%
Professional technical course	17,1%

Data Analysis

The data analysis process of this study unfolded across several stages. Initially, using SPSS software (v.25), we conducted statistical analyses on variables and their respective measurement items. Subsequently, we scrutinized the measurement items to ensure their validity and reliability. The PLS method was applied in Smart PLS (V. 3.0) to test the established relationships between constructs.

The evaluation of the model obtained after applying the PLS method adhered to measures recommended by Hair et al., (2009): (i) Cronbach's Alpha measurements; (ii) composite reliability; (iii) Average Variance Extracted; and (iv) discriminant validity assessed through the Fornell-Larcker criterion. According to Sarstedt et al., (2021), items are deemed reliable if Cronbach's Alpha coefficient exceeds 0.70. Composite reliability assesses the internal consistency among items comprising constructs, with a CR exceeding 0.70 indicating shared variance and internal consistency. The AVE measures the variance captured by each construct relative to measurement error variance, with a minimum threshold of 0.50. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where discriminant validity exists between constructs when the square root of the AVE of a construct exceeds the correlation between that construct and any other.

The structural model and hypotheses were then subjected to bootstrapping techniques for testing, with mediating effects extensively assessed through bootstrap analysis, a non-parametric procedure testing the statistical significance of results derived from the PLS model.

3.4. Results

Statistical description of variables

In analyzing the EBBE data, participants exhibit predominantly positive perceptions across various constructs (see Table 7). Overall, the EBBE scores relatively high (M = 4.21), indicating a robust connection and commitment to the organization's brand.

Table 7 - Statistical description of variables

	Mean	Std. Deviation
EBBE	4,21**	0,895**
EBBE – BE - Brand Endorsement	4,32**	0,826**
<i>EBBE_BE_1_ I say positive things about the organization (brand) I work for</i>	4,37	0,762
<i>EBBE_BE_2_ I would recommend the organization (brand) I work for to someone who seeks my advice</i>	4,32	0,812
<i>EBBE_BE_3_ I enjoy talking about the organization (brand) I work for to others</i>	4,24	0,924
<i>EBBE_BE_4_ I talk positively about the organization (brand) I work for to others</i>	4,34	0,808
EBBE – BA - Brand Allegiance	3,95**	1,051**
<i>EBBE_BA_1_ I plan to be with the organization I work for, for a while</i>	4,29	0,911
<i>EBBE_BA_2_ I plan to be with the organization (brand) I work for five years from now</i>	3,98	1,159
<i>EBBE_BA_3_ I would turn down an offer from another organization (brand) if it came tomorrow</i>	3,39	1,157
<i>EBBE_BA_4_ I plan to stay longer with the organization (brand) I work for</i>	4,15	0,977
EBBE – BCB - Brand Consistent Behavior	4,42**	0,779**
<i>EBBE_BCB_1_ I demonstrate behaviour that are consistent with the brand promise of the organization I work for</i>	4,46	0,729
<i>EBBE_BCB_2_ I consider the impact on my organization's brand before communicating or taking action in any situation</i>	4,33	0,809
<i>EBBE_BCB_3_ I am always interested to learn about my organization's brand and what it means to me in my role</i>	4,46	0,800
Brand-specific TFL	4,15**	0,955**
<i>TFL_1_ My leader re-examines critical assumptions of our brand promise</i>	4,17	0,935
<i>TFL_2_ My leader seeks different perspectives when interpreting our corporate brand values</i>	4,18	0,909
<i>TFL_3_ My leader looks at my job in terms of a branding task</i>	4,11	0,988
<i>TFL_4_ My leader suggests a brand promoter's perspective of looking at how to complete assignments</i>	4,17	0,911
<i>TFL_5_ My leader talks optimistically about the future of our corporate brand</i>	4,19	0,924
<i>TFL_6_ My leader talks enthusiastically about what needs to be accomplished to strengthen our corporate brand</i>	4,19	0,914
<i>TFL_7_ My leader articulates a compelling vision of our corporate brand</i>	4,22	0,891
<i>TFL_8_ My leader expresses confidence that brand-related goals will be achieved</i>	4,21	0,888
<i>TFL_9_ My leader is proud of being associated with our corporate brand</i>	4,41	0,826
<i>TFL_10_ My leader goes beyond self-interest for the good of the corporate brand</i>	4,24	0,941
<i>TFL_11_ My leader lives our corporate brand in ways that build my respect</i>	4,22	0,970

<i>TFL_12_ My leader displays a sense of power and confidence when talking about our corporate brand</i>	4,23	0,926
<i>TFL_13_ My leader specify the importance of having a strong sense of our corporate brand</i>	4,17	0,917
<i>TFL_14_ My leader talks about our most important brand values and our belief in them</i>	4,11	0,952
<i>TFL_15_ My leader considers the moral and ethical consequences of our brand promise</i>	4,17	0,927
<i>TFL_16_ My leader emphasizes the importance of having a collective sense of our brand mission</i>	4,21	0,885
<i>TFL_17_ My leader spends time teaching and coaching myself in brand-related issues</i>	3,90	1,100
<i>TFL_18_ My leader treats myself as an individual rather than just one of many members of the corporate brand</i>	4,02	1,104
<i>TFL_19_ My leader considers myself as having different needs, abilities, and aspirations from other members of the corporate brand</i>	3,93	1,101
<i>TFL_20_ My leader develops my strengths with regard to becoming a good representative of our brand</i>	4,00	1,093
Employer branding	3,63**	1,178**
EB - HWA – Healthy Work Atmosphere	3,84**	1,058**
<i>EB_HWA_1_ My organisation provides autonomy to its employees to take decisions</i>	3,72	1,112
<i>EB_HWA_2_ My organisation offers opportunities to enjoy a group atmosphere</i>	4,06	0,985
<i>EB_HWA_3_ I have friends at work who are ready to share my responsibility at work in my absence</i>	3,98	1,051
<i>EB_HWA_4_ My organisation recognises me when I do good work</i>	3,69	1,109
<i>EB_HWA_5_ My organisation offers a relatively stress-free work environment</i>	3,42	1,160
<i>EB_HWA_6_ My organisation offers opportunity to work in teams</i>	4,18	0,931
EB –TD - Training and Development	3,58**	1,254**
<i>EB_TD_1_ My organisation provides us online training courses</i>	3,73	1,417
<i>EB_TD_2_ My organisation organises various conferences, workshops and training programmes on regular basis</i>	3,69	1,258
<i>EB_TD_3_ my organisation offers opportunities to work on foreign projects</i>	3,31	1,288
<i>EB_TD_4_ My organisation invests heavily in training and development of its employees</i>	3,77	1,216
<i>EB_TD_5_ Skill development is a continuous process in my organisation</i>	3,86	1,107
<i>EB_TD_6_ My organisation communicates clear advancement path for its employees</i>	3,12	1,235
EB – WLF - Work Life Balance	3,32**	1,373**
<i>EB_WLF_1_ My organisation provides flexible-working hours</i>	3,78	1,231
<i>EB_WLF_2_ My organisation offers opportunity to work from home</i>	3,05	1,464
<i>EB_WLF_3_ My organisation provides on-site sports facility</i>	3,15	1,424
<i>EB_ECSR_1_ My organisation has fair attitude towards employees</i>	3,57	1,143
EB – ECSR -Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility	4,03**	0,991**

<i>EB_ECSR_2_ Employees are expected to follow all rules and regulations</i>	4,31	0,848
<i>EB_ECSR_3_ Humanitarian organisation gives back to the society</i>	4,44	0,807
<i>EB_ECSR_4_ There is a confidential procedure to report misconduct at work</i>	3,82	1,167
EB-CB - Compensation and Benefits	3,22**	1,286**
<i>EB_CB_1_ In general, the salary offered by my organisation is high</i>	2,47	1,212
<i>EB_CB_2_ My organisation provides overtime pay</i>	3,59	1,263
<i>EB_CB_3_ My organisation provides good health benefits</i>	3,44	1,286
<i>EB_CB_4_ My organisation provides insurance coverage for employees and dependents</i>	3,37	1,384

Note: ** Mean value of items that measure latent variables.

Source: Own Elaboration

Analyzing the brand-specific TFL data reveals positive perceptions among participants (see Table 7). Employer Branding data reveals positive perceptions among participants across key dimensions (EB: M = 3.63).

Measures of Reliability and Validity

All items demonstrate substantial confirmatory factor loads (>0.60) (Ringle et al., 2020), (See Table 8).

Table 8 - Confirmatory Factory Loads

	BRAND SPECIFIC TFL	EB	EB_HW A	EBB E	EBBE_B A	EBBE_BC B	EBBE_B E	EB_C B	EB_ECS R	EB_T D	EB_WL F
EBBE_BA_1					0.924						
EBBE_BA_2					0.892						
EBBE_BA_3					0.714						
EBBE_BA_4					0.934						
EBBE_BCB_1						0.904					
EBBE_BCB_2						0.916					
EBBE_BCB_3						0.916					
EBBE_BE_2							0.911				
EBBE_BE_3							0.901				

EBBE_BE_4		0.949	
EBBE	1.000		
EB_CB_1		0.813	
EB_CB_2		0.663	
EB_CB_3		0.874	
EB_CB_4		0.829	
EB_ECSR_1			0.812
EB_ECSR_2			0.814
EB_ECSR_3			0.863
EB_ECSR_4			0.708
EB_HWA_1	0.788		
EB_HWA_2	0.865		
EB_HWA_3	0.724		
EB_HWA_4	0.862		
EB_HWA_5	0.833		
EB_HWA_6	0.863		
EB_TD_1			0.808
EB_TD_2			0.876
EB_TD_3			0.810
EB_TD_4			0.919
EB_TD_5			0.890
EB_TD_6			0.751
EB_TOTAL	1.000		
EB_WLF_1			0.821
EB_WLF_2			0.809

EB_WLF_3		0.733
TFL_1	0.872	
TFL_10	0.816	
TFL_11	0.906	
TFL_12	0.881	
TFL_13	0.898	
TFL_14	0.894	
TFL_15	0.912	
TFL_16	0.909	
TFL_17	0.843	
TFL_18	0.759	
TFL_19	0.778	
TFL_2	0.890	
TFL_20	0.846	
TFL_3	0.826	
TFL_4	0.846	
TFL_5	0.857	
TFL_6	0.899	
TFL_7	0.899	
TFL_8	0.879	
TFL_9	0.839	
EBBE_BE_1		0.928

Source: Own Elaboration

In assessing the reliability of the sample, we used three fundamental metrics as prescribed by Hair et al., (2009): Cronbach's alpha (reference $\alpha > 0.70$), composite

reliability (reference CR > 0.70), and average variance extracted (reference AVE > 0.50). As depicted in the provided data, the results consistently surpass the established thresholds across all constructs, ensuring model convergence and reliability (See Table 9).

Table 9 - Model Reliability and Validity

	CRONBACH'S ALPHA	COMPOSITE RELIABILITY	AVERAGE VARIANCE EXTRACTED (AVE)
BRAND SPECIFIC TFL	0.982	0.983	0.746
EB	1.000	1.000	1.000
EB-HWA	0.905	0.927	0.679
EBBE	1.000	1.000	1.000
EBBE_BA	0.890	0.926	0.759
EBBE_BCB	0.899	0.937	0.832
EBBE_BE	0.942	0.958	0.851
EB_CB	0.807	0.875	0.638
EB_ECSR	0.813	0.877	0.642
EB_TD	0.919	0.937	0.713
EB_WLF	0.695	0.831	0.622

Source: Own Elaboration

The Fornell Larcker criterion (See Table 10) confirms discriminant validity among the constructs in the analysis, since the square root of the average variance extracted by a construct is greater than the correlation between each construct.

Table 10 - Fornell Larcker criterion

	BRAND SPECIFIC TFL	EB	EB-HWA	EBBE	EBBE_B A	EBBE_BC B	EBBE_B E	EB_C B	EB_ECS R	EB_TD	EB_WLF
BRAND SPECIFIC TFL	0.864										
EB	0.708	1.000									
EB-HWA	0.735	0.893	0.824								
EBBE	0.664	0.716	0.716	1.000							

EBBE_BA	0.547	0.638	0.656	0.899	0.871					
EBBE_BCB	0.603	0.606	0.568	0.836	0.595	0.912				
EBBE_BE	0.636	0.655	0.663	0.915	0.704	0.743	0.923			
EB_CB	0.552	0.814	0.626	0.561	0.508	0.498	0.483	0.799		
EB_ECSR	0.645	0.836	0.770	0.674	0.550	0.645	0.631	0.587	0.801	
EB_TD	0.589	0.902	0.733	0.600	0.532	0.505	0.551	0.655	0.680	0.844
EB_WLF	0.523	0.811	0.668	0.535	0.485	0.426	0.498	0.620	0.636	0.655 0.789

Source: Own Elaboration

The Stone-Geisser Q² values were calculated to evaluate the predictive capability of the model across different constructs. Q² values represent the proportion of variance in each construct that the model can predict. For EB-HWA, EBBE, and EBBE_BE, Q² ranges from 0.166 to 0.555, indicating significant predictive power. However, for EB_CB and EB_WLF, Q² is lower (0.166 to 0.191), still suggesting some predictive relevance.

Structural Model Testing

First, the direct relationships of the structural model were tested through a bootstrapping analysis (See Table 11). We then performed a second bootstrapping analysis to measure the mediating effects (See Table 12).

Table 11 - Results of direct effects

	COEF.	T STATISTICS	P VALUES	HYPOTHESIS SUPPORTED
H1: BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EBBE	0.315	5.599	0.000	Yes
H2: BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB	0.708	25.890	0.000	Yes
H2A: BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB-HWA	0.735	28.181	0.000	Yes
H2B: BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB_TD	0.589	17.090	0.000	Yes
H2C: BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB_WLF	0.523	14.974	0.000	Yes
H2D: BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB_ECSR	0.645	18.745	0.000	Yes
H2E: BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB_CB	0.552	18.496	0.000	Yes
H3: EB -> EBBE	0.493	9.617	0.000	Yes
H3A: EB -> EBBE_BE	0.655	22.087	0.000	Yes
H3B: EB -> EBBE_BA	0.638	20.591	0.000	Yes

H3C: EB -> EBBE_BCB	0.606	19.127	0.000	Yes
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Source: Own Elaboration

The findings (see Table 11) underscore the significant relationships observed in the model. The analysis reveals a positive association between Brand-Specific TFL and EBBE, confirming H1. Moreover, Brand-Specific TFL demonstrates substantial positive impacts on various dimensions of EB, lending support to H2. Additionally, EB exhibits a positive relationship with EBBE and its dimensions affirming H3. These results highlight the pivotal role of Brand Specific TFL and EB in shaping EBBE and its components positively.

Table 12 - Results of indirect effects

	COEF.	T STATISTICS	P VALUES	HYPOTHESIS SUPPORTED
H4: BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB -> EBBE	0.349	9.482	0.000	Yes
BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB -> EBBE_BE	0.464	14.283	0.000	Yes
BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB -> EBBE_BA	0.452	14.436	0.000	Yes
BRAND SPECIFIC TFL -> EB -> EBBE_BCB	0.429	13.492	0.000	Yes

Source: Own Elaboration

Upon analyzing the mediating effects, the path coefficient for the mediation pathway Brand Specific TFL -> EB -> EBBE ($\beta = 0.349$) is higher than the direct path coefficient for Brand Specific TFL -> EBBE ($\beta = 0.315$). This suggests that the relationship between brand-specific TFL and EBBE is stronger when mediated by EB.

The path coefficients for the mediation pathways are significant: Brand Specific TFL -> EB -> EBBE_BE ($\beta = 0.464$, $T = 14.283$, $p < 0.001$), Brand Specific TFL -> EB -> EBBE_BA ($\beta = 0.452$, $T = 14.436$, $p < 0.001$), and Brand Specific TFL -> EB -> EBBE_BCB ($\beta = 0.429$, $T = 13.492$, $p < 0.001$), supporting also the mediating effect in the EBBE components.

3.5. Discussion

The discussion of our study's findings within the B2B context underscores a critical exploration of the intricate relationship between brand-specific TFL, employer branding, and EBBE. Anchored in a theoretical framework that acknowledges the characteristics of B2B environments, our research seeks to address gaps in the existing literature and contribute to a deeper understanding of branding dynamics in this domain. Unlike B2C contexts, where consumer-brand interactions often revolve around emotional connections and impulse purchasing, B2B transactions are characterized by longer decision-making processes and a greater emphasis on factors such as reliability, efficiency, and trust (Bendixen et al., 2004; Bennett et al., 2005; Beverland et al., 2007; Mudambi, 2002). In B2B environments, factors like brand reputation and alignment with organizational goals are crucial, and brand-specific TFL and employer branding may have a unique impact on EBBE (Deepa & Baral, 2021).

Starting with our first hypothesis (H1), which posited a positive relationship between brand-specific TFL and EBBE, our findings support this notion, aligning with prior literature emphasizing leadership's pivotal role in shaping employee perceptions and attitudes toward the brand (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Lee et al., 2020b; Morhart et al., 2009). Within the competitive realm of B2B markets, where nuanced differentiation is crucial (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010), the significance of TFL becomes indispensable in brand cultivation. Our research unveils a crucial aspect: brand-specific TFL fosters an enduring rapport between employees and the brand. In the B2B context, the anchorage of the brand is within the hearts and minds of the workforce (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010).

Moving on to hypotheses H2 and its sub-hypotheses (H2a to H2e), which examined the relationship between brand-specific TFL and employer branding, our results indicate strong support for these relationships. This underscores the role of brand-specific TFL in driving the development and communication of a compelling employer brand (Morhart et al., 2009; Terglav et al., 2016b). Our analysis illuminates three pivotal domains within employer branding where brand-specific TFL exerts particularly potent effects: Healthy Work Atmosphere, Training and Development, and Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In B2B markets, where employees often engage directly with clients and stakeholders, the cohesiveness of the team and their alignment with the brand's values are crucial. Transformational leaders use their charisma and effective communication to foster a supportive and positive work environment (Sun et al., 2014;

Zaccaro et al., 2001). Secondly, B2B transactions typically involve complex products or services that require a deep understanding and expert handling. Brand-specific TFL play a pivotal role in facilitating cognitive growth among employees due to the substantial influence their actions exert on skill development (Morhart et al. 2009). Lastly, Ethics and CSR are increasingly important in business decision-making processes, especially in B2B sectors where companies often seek partners who demonstrate responsibility and sustainability. By integrating CSR into leadership practices, organizations not only uphold ethical standards but also cultivate a sense of purpose and social responsibility among employees (Angus-Leppan et al. 2010; Pless et al. 2012). By elucidating the profound impact of brand-specific TFL on these critical dimensions of employer branding within B2B contexts, we offer nuanced insights that advance scholarly discourse and inform managerial practice.

Similarly, hypothesis H3 and its sub-hypotheses (H3a to H3c), which examine the relationship between employer branding and EBBE, were positive and hold distinct relevance for B2B markets. Unlike in B2C sectors, where brand loyalty and advocacy may stem from emotional connections, in B2B contexts, where business partnerships are often long-term and strategic, employer branding plays a pivotal role in engendering employee commitment and advocacy. Notably, the relationship between employer branding and Brand Endorsement stands out with the highest coefficient. This underscores the effectiveness of employer branding strategies in garnering employee advocacy for the brand (Deepa & Baral, 2021; King & Grace, 2009). This is crucial in B2B markets where word-of-mouth and personal recommendations can greatly influence business partnerships. The positive influence of employer branding on Brand Allegiance suggests that organizational branding efforts aimed at fostering employee loyalty yield tangible benefits (Said et al., 2020). Lastly, the empirical support for the relationship between employer branding and Brand Consistent Behavior highlights the role of employer branding initiatives in instilling a sense of brand consistency and coherence among employees.

Hypothesis H4, which examined the mediating role of employer branding also receives empirical support. This implies that while brand-specific TFL directly influences EBBE, a considerable portion of this influence is channeled through its impact on employer branding. B2B contexts rely heavily on sustained interpersonal relationships and deep trust, both of which are cultivated by transformational leadership (Bendixen et al., 2004; Bennett et al., 2005; Beverland et al., 2007; Mudambi, 2002). Our findings reveal that in

B2B settings, the impact of such leadership on EBBE is significantly mediated by the strength of employer branding, highlighting how crucial internal branding efforts are in translating leadership qualities into a competitive advantage (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). The presence of strong leadership qualities fosters the development of a robust employer brand, which in turn enhances employee perceptions of the brand, ultimately contributing to heightened EBBE (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Deepa & Baral, 2021; Morhart et al., 2009).

Practical Implications

Our results underscore the importance of B2B companies investing in leadership development programs that cultivate brand-specific TFL behaviors. These programs should focus on fostering qualities such as vision, inspiration, and empowerment, but also on fostering a Healthy Work Atmosphere, facilitating Training and Development, and promoting Ethics and CSR. By aligning leadership behaviors with the organization's brand values and objectives across these dimensions, companies can ensure consistency and coherence in their approach to leadership and branding.

Secondly, our findings highlight the significance of employer branding initiatives in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors toward the brand. Organizations should focus on communicating a clear and compelling employer brand message that resonates with employees' values and aspirations. This may involve showcasing opportunities for career growth, and emphasizing organizational values.

Thirdly, B2B firms should adopt a holistic approach to brand management that integrates leadership development, employer branding, and brand-building efforts. This involves aligning internal organizational strategies to ensure consistency and coherence across all touchpoints.

Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study are significant in advancing our understanding of the dynamics between brand-specific TFL, employer branding, and EBBE within the B2B context. By empirically testing and validating the relationships proposed in our conceptual model, we contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of EBBE and its antecedents. Our study extends the existing literature by highlighting the mediating role of employer branding in the relationship between brand-specific TFL and EBBE.

Overall, this paper contributes to the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms driving EBBE within B2B firms. As one of

the pioneering studies investigating these dynamics considering the particularities of the B2B domain, our research also fills this gap in the literature.

3.6. Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the intricate relationships between brand-specific TFL employer branding, and EBBE within the context of B2B firms. Through empirical analysis, we aimed to shed light on how leadership practices and employer branding initiatives influence employees' knowledge of the brand and, consequently, contribute to the EBBE.

Our findings underscored several key insights. Firstly, we found robust empirical support for the positive influence of brand-specific TFL on EBBE. Brand-specific leaders who exhibit transformational leadership traits play a crucial role in inspiring and aligning employees with the brand's vision and values, thereby enhancing EBBE within the organization (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Morhart et al., 2009). Secondly, our study revealed the significant impact of employer branding initiatives on shaping employee attitudes and behaviors towards the brand (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015; Deepa & Baral, 2021).

The main theoretical contributions of our study lie in advancing the understanding of the mechanisms driving EBBE within B2B firms. By empirically testing and validating the proposed relationships, we contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of EBBE and its antecedents. Moreover, our research extends the existing literature by highlighting the mediating role of employer branding in the relationship between brand-specific TFL and EBBE, emphasizing the importance of leadership and employer branding practices in shaping employee perceptions of the brand.

However, our study is not without limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted within a specific context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other sectors. Additionally, the study relied on self-report measures, which may introduce biases into the data. Future research could address these limitations by exploring the dynamics of brand-specific TFL, employer branding, and EBBE across diverse industry settings. Additionally, this study only captures a snapshot in time, limiting the ability to establish causality. Future research should explore these dynamics and employ longitudinal designs for a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving nature of EBBE in B2B firms. Furthermore, our study does not consider other mediators that might influence these associations, such as organizational culture, employees' seniority within the

company, and their social demographic characteristics. Lastly, future research endeavors could benefit from incorporating qualitative methods to explore this subject further.

In conclusion, this study contributes to both theoretical knowledge and managerial practice by providing valuable insights into effective brand management strategies in the B2B context. By elucidating the complex interrelationships between brand-specific, employer branding, and EBBE, our research offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and enhancing EBBE within B2B enterprises.

CHAPTER 4 - From Within: How Employee-Based Brand Equity Influences B2B Brand Equity - A Multilevel Study

Abstract:

Purpose: The present study aims to build a comprehensive conceptual model that not only considers the dimensions of B2B brand equity but also integrates the influential dimension of employee-based brand equity (EBBE). The goal is to unveil the dynamics among EBBE, brand image, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity within the domain of B2B firms.

Design/methodology/approach: This study adopts a multilevel approach. Data was collected from both employees and clients within the context of B2B firms. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is employed to analyze the conceptual model, using the partial least square (PLS) method of Smart PLS (V3.0).

Findings: The results affirm positive associations between EBBE and brand image, brand loyalty, and overall B2B brand equity. Brand image also presents a positive relationship with overall B2B brand equity. Additionally, EBBE's positive impact on overall brand equity is heightened when mediated by brand image. Brand loyalty exhibited a negative effect on overall brand equity.

Originality/value: This study contributes by empirically testing the B2B brand equity model, shedding light on the pivotal role of employees in shaping external brand perceptions. The findings suggest the need for a holistic approach to brand management, integrating internal and external brand-building efforts for enhanced competitiveness in the B2B landscape.

Keywords: *Employee-Based Brand Equity; B2B Brand Equity; Brand Image; Brand Loyalty*

4.1. Introduction

In the world of commerce, business-to-business (B2B) transactions are the driving force behind economic activity (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). Despite this pivotal role, branding discussions have primarily focused on consumer contexts, overshadowing the importance of B2B branding. Developing and nurturing a strong brand in the B2B sector is crucial to creating corporate brand image and establishing brand equity (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a; Kristal et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding the dimensions of B2B brand equity becomes essential for businesses aiming to thrive in today's competitive marketplace.

Brand equity, an integral part of brand management, represents the incremental value added to a company or a product attributed to branding elements such as brand name and logo (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). While B2B brand equity has gained traction in beginning of the twenty-first century, it remains a fragmented concept in the literature (Biedenbach et al., 2019; Biedenbach & Marell, 2010). To unearth new strategies for success in this dynamic environment, it is necessary to broaden the horizons of B2B brand equity research (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). By embracing a more comprehensive perspective of B2B branding, businesses can forge stronger brand identities, build lasting relationships, and secure a competitive advantage in the dynamic global market (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a; Steenkamp et al., 2020).

In the journey of unraveling the complexities of B2B brand equity, Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) emerges as a concept that requires exploration. EBBE represents the unique influence of an employee's understanding of a brand on their responses to the work environment (King et al., 2012a; King & Grace, 2009, 2010). The consistency of employee behavior with the brand identity and values, as well as their emotional attachment and motivation to engage with customers and influencers, is vital in establishing and nurturing brand equity in B2B markets (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). However, the role of employees in shaping brand identity and brand equity in the B2B sector has not yet received the attention needed (Bendixen et al., 2004; Biedenbach et al., 2019; Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011).

Several authors suggest researching EBBE in industrial and B2B environments (Altaf et al., 2022; King & Grace, 2009; Uford & Duh, 2021). Testing EBBE in B2B and industrial businesses is important for several reasons. Firstly, B2B companies operate within unique market dynamics, where these organizations often engage in long-term relationships and partnerships with other businesses, relying heavily on trust, credibility, and reputation (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). Secondly, in B2B environments

employees, as representatives of their organizations, play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining relationships with clients, influencing their perceptions of the brand, and fostering long-term loyalty (Biedenbach et al., 2019). Overall, testing EBBE in B2B and industrial businesses allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how employee perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors shape brand equity in these unique contexts. The findings can inform strategic decision-making, marketing efforts, and employee engagement initiatives, ultimately leading to enhanced brand performance and competitive advantage in B2B markets (Altaf et al., 2022; King & Grace, 2009; Uford & Duh, 2021).

In light of the gaps identified in the realm of B2B brand equity and the emerging importance of EBBE, our present study aims to examine the relationship between EBBE and B2B brand equity. We endeavor to create a holistic conceptual model that considers not only the dimensions of brand equity but also the influential dimension of EBBE. To achieve our goal, we adopted a multilevel approach. We have surveyed both customers and employees from companies in the B2B services market. This approach allows us to gain a more holistic view of the dynamics at play in the B2B branding arena. Additionally, our study addresses limitations observed in prior multilevel research in this field, where brand equity assessments were predominantly conducted from the managerial perspective rather than considering the viewpoint of clients (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Liu et al., 2020).

Our study contributes to the extant literature on B2B branding by addressing these gaps and enriching our understanding of the interplay between employee perceptions and B2B brand equity. This exploration is not only of interest to researchers but also holds practical implications for businesses aiming to enhance their brand performance and secure a competitive edge in B2B markets. In the forthcoming sections of our study, we will delve deeper into the realms of literature review and the statement of our hypothesis. We will present our conceptual model, outline our methods, and discuss the findings. The paper will culminate in a conclusion, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting future research directions.

4.2. Literature Review

Brand Equity Theory

The core theoretical foundation of this research is based on brand equity theory derived from marketing research. According to Kotler, (1991), a brand encompasses a name, term, sign, symbol, or design with the primary purpose of distinguishing the goods or services of a company from those of competitors.

In recent decades, professionals and academics alike have invested significant efforts in establishing these robust brands (H. Kim et al., 2003). In today's fiercely competitive market, Sadek et al., (2015) propose that strong brands and brand equity play pivotal roles in gaining a competitive advantage. Traditionally, brand equity is defined as the sum of assets and liabilities associated with a particular brand, including its logo, which adds or subtracts value to a product or service from a company (Aaker, 1991). Brand equity is the concept that best describes a brand's value, helping a company position itself against its competitors (Devendranath Reddy & Fabiyola Kavitha, 2019).

The brand equity paradigm has been extensively discussed in marketing literature, and many authors have offered a wide range of definitions for its concept (Aaker, 1991; Davcik et al., 2015; Keller, 1993). Aaker, (1991) provided the initial conceptualization, which is considered one of the most comprehensive sources of this concept. He defines brand equity as the strength of the brand in the customers' minds, and as a multidimensional construct with five dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand image, brand equity-related assets, and brand loyalty. Among these dimensions, brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty are considered sufficient to represent consumers' evaluations and reactions to a brand (Tong & Hawley, 2009). Another widely used conceptualization is Keller, (1993), which suggests that brand equity encompasses consumer attitudes and actions towards the brand and a set of brand associations that evoke attributes stored in the consumer's memory. Keller, (2001) provided six dimensions: brand salience, brand performance, brand image, brand judgments, brand feelings, and brand resonance.

Despite its financial origins, the term "equity" assumes a subjective perspective at its core, embodying intangible signals highly valued by consumers (Davcik et al., 2015). Brand equity has undergone a gradual evolution of perspectives, initially viewed through a financial lens, followed by a focus on consumers, and more recently, on employees. Proponents of the financial perspective define brand equity as the total value of a brand when it is sold or included in a balance sheet (Atilgan et al., 2009). On the other hand, customer-based brand equity (CBBE) represents the viewpoint of consumers (Keller, 1998). In the context of EBBE, the emphasis lies on the distinct impact that brand

knowledge has on an employee's response to their work environment (King et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2009, 2010).

B2B Brand Equity

The body of literature on B2B brand equity remains fragmented, spanning a diverse range of subjects (Biedenbach et al., 2019; Biedenbach & Marell, 2010). Even though there is an ongoing debate about the specific components of B2B brand equity, the industrial branding literature provides support for the theoretical assertion of its multidimensional nature (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010).

Some researchers found that perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand associations contribute to B2B brand equity, shaping customer loyalty and influencing their purchase intentions (J.-H. Kim & Hyun, 2011; Steenkamp et al., 2020). Brand awareness and brand associations have also been deemed pertinent in specific industrial markets (Michell et al., 2001; van Riel et al., 2005). One of the initial investigations applying Aaker, (1991) multidimensional model in the B2B setting, elucidates that brand equity is shaped by factors like brand awareness, associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Gordon et al., 1993). In Taylor et al., (2007) framework, perceived quality indirectly influences overall brand equity, with loyalty, as measured through intentions, emerging as an outcome resulting from overall brand equity.

Davis et al., (2008) established a positive relationship between brand awareness and brand equity, as well as between brand image and brand equity in the B2B service context. B2B brand awareness is the customer's ability to recognize and recall the brand across diverse situations (Aaker, 1996b; Davis et al., 2008, 2009). On the other hand, B2B brand image encompasses the attributes and benefits linked to a brand that set it apart, differentiating the firm's offerings from competitors. Overall brand equity represents the customer's viewpoint (Davis et al., 2009; Juntunen et al., 2011; Keller & Webster, 2004).

Employee-Based Brand Equity

The concept of EBBE emerges from the application of marketing principles to the realm of human resource management. It recognizes that employees are not only influenced by the company's image but also play a significant role in shaping the company's identity

(King et al., 2012). In this way, both scholars and practitioners are encouraged to expand their perspectives and practices concerning how brands generate value, how marketing effectiveness is assessed, and the integration of marketing into human resources and financial operations (Tavassoli et al., 2014).

The EBBE concept, introduced by King & Grace, (2009), has since spurred a multitude of research perspectives, underlining its significance in the domain of brand management. EBBE can be perceived as the distinctive impact of an employee's grasp of a brand on their reactions to their work environment, necessitating the meaningful integration of the brand identity into their roles and responsibilities (King et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2009, 2010). Ghose, (2009) further elaborates on EBBE, characterizing it as the level of motivation instilled in employees to align with the brand's vision and the organization's shared objectives. Additionally, EBBE is seen as the result of employees possessing an elevated level of brand knowledge, leading to positive behaviors aligned with the organization's brand identity (Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2007).

King et al., (2012) conducted a validation of the EBBE scale, encompassing three essential dimensions. 1) Brand Allegiance: This dimension assesses employees' inclination to remain with the organization in the future. 2) Brand-Consistent Behavior: This dimension pertains to employees' voluntary behaviors that align with the brand and the organization's values, extending beyond their prescribed roles. 3) Brand Endorsement: This dimension measures employees' willingness to share positive sentiments about the organization (brand) with others (King et al., 2012; Poulis & Wisker, 2016).

Acquiring a deeper understanding and proficiently managing the outcomes stemming from EBBE is essential for organizations striving to establish a resilient and long-lasting brand identity, all the while nurturing a committed and enthusiastic workforce (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020). Although previous research has made valuable strides in comprehending the consequences of EBBE, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge that warrant further investigation. It is necessary to delve deeper into researching the outcomes of EBBE, particularly within B2B enterprises, to fully harness its potential as a strategic driver for brand success (Altaf et al., 2022; King & Grace, 2009; Uford & Duh, 2021).

EBBE, brand image, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity

One prevailing recommendation to improve brand equity research is to adopt a more holistic approach to exploring the concept, encompassing the perspectives of various stakeholders, including the employees (Duh & Uford, 2019). A comprehensive exploration of brand equity, would be incomplete without considering the contributions of these stakeholders (Chen, 2008; Vomberg et al., 2015).

Prados-Peña & Del Barrio-García, (2021) draw parallels between EBBE and external brand equity, emphasizing that both stem from the brand's intrinsic attributes. When employees internalize the brand's values, demonstrating a stronger dedication and engagement, it fosters EBBE. This, in turn, can surpass customer expectations, positively influencing external brand image.

B2B branding goes beyond the interactions between businesses, it involves a complex web of stakeholders who actively participate in the co-creation of the corporate brand image. Stakeholders such as employees, partners, suppliers, and investors, play a crucial role in formulating the corporate brand strategy (Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011; Zhang et al., 2016) and influencing brand perceptions (Törmälä & Saraniemi, 2018). Interpersonal communication between employees and customers has been emphasized as particularly vital for B2B brands, fostering strong relationships and trust (Bendixen et al., 2004; Bennett et al., 2005; Mudambi, 2002). The behavior of brand representatives, who directly interact with resellers and customers, significantly impacts their purchase intentions (Ryan & Silvanto, 2013).

Moreover, in situations where EBBE is both high and positive, employees consistently fulfill their brand's promise, as described by Keller, (2008), as the marketer's vision of what the brand must be and do for consumers. Scholars such as King & Grace, (2009), Duh & Uford, (2019), and Boukis & Christodoulides, (2020) provided also compelling evidence of the pivotal role played by employees in shaping a brand's identity and its impact on brand equity. These studies reveal that when employees internalize the brand's values, demonstrate dedication, and positively engage with the brand, it significantly strengthens the brand's perception among customers.

Researchers have also presented compelling empirical evidence regarding the substantial influence of EBBE on customer behavior (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Duh & Uford, 2019). Their studies underline how EBBE significantly shapes customer orientation, and customer brand preference, influences repurchase intentions, and even leads to a greater willingness among customers to pay premium prices. Biedenbach et al., (2019) found that human capital has a stronger direct impact on B2B brand loyalty. Furthermore, Ryan & Silvanto, (2013) provide insights into the critical role played by

brand representatives who engage directly with resellers and customers. Their findings emphasize that the behavior of these brand representatives significantly affects the purchase intentions of external stakeholders, which adds a nuanced perspective to the influence of EBBE.

King & Grace, (2009) underscore the foundational significance of EBBE as a precursor to a company's brand equity, emphasizing how EBBE, rooted in the brand's core values and characteristics, substantially contributes to external brand equity. This highlights the pivotal role employees play in shaping a brand's identity and its subsequent impact on brand equity. He, (2022) adds to this body of evidence by emphasizing the significant prediction of EBBE by brand identity and brand knowledge. Organizations can foster positive EBBE through training and brand promotion activities, resulting in a positive contribution to overall external brand equity. Studies have revealed that employees who exemplify the brand's identity and values have a key role in cultivating a corporate culture centered on the brand. This, in turn, has a beneficial impact on both the brand's internal and external equity (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010).

Furthermore, research by Biedenbach et al., (2019) underscores that human capital and the establishment of relational trust exert substantial influence on the fundamental aspects of B2B brand equity, underscoring the significance of dedicating resources to building strong relationships with employees and customers. Research also indicates that within the context of a knowledge-intensive B2B industry, a company's internal capabilities can play a pivotal role in facilitating the creation of enduring brand equity through collaborative value co-creation with customers (Huynh et al., 2021).

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. EBBE is positively related to B2B brand image

H2. EBBE is positively related to B2B brand loyalty

H3. EBBE is positively related to Overall B2B Brand Equity

H4a. EBBE positively influences Overall B2B Brand Equity, when mediated by brand image

H4b. EBBE positively influences Overall B2B Brand Equity, when mediated by brand loyalty

Brand Image, brand loyalty, and B2B brand equity

Davis et al., (2008) research stands out as one of the few studies focusing on branding within B2B service markets. They adopt Keller, (1993) brand equity definition, suggesting that brand equity accruing to a firm, rather than to a product, is the pertinent dependent variable in the realm of B2B services. Davis et al., (2008, 2009) propose that brand equity materializes when customers possess awareness of the brand and associate it with favorable, distinctive attributes.

Nevertheless, the authors discovered that when B2B brand equity is assessed through customer perceptions, brand image emerges as a notably more impactful factor in influencing brand equity than brand awareness. Prioritizing initiatives that guarantee a positive and consistent brand image, such as employee training, may yield more effective results compared to investing in costly endeavors directed at enhancing brand awareness, such as advertising (Davis et al., 2008). The research conducted by Juntunen et al., (2011) further supports the idea that corporate brand image influences the overall corporate brand equity.

In the realm of brand equity discussions, brand loyalty is traditionally viewed as a component of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Rauyrueen et al., 2009; Rios & Riquelme, 2008). However, an alternative viewpoint, as suggested by several researchers (Taylor et al., 2004; van Riel et al., 2005) argues that loyalty is an outcome of brand equity. Hence, an ongoing debate persists regarding whether brand loyalty should be considered an intrinsic component of brand equity or an outcome molded by it (Juntunen et al., 2011).

Based on the work of Keller, (1993), Davis et al., (2008, 2009), and Juntunen et al., (2011), we postulate several relationships within the context of B2B brand equity. First, we assume that brand image has positive associations with B2B brand equity. Furthermore, consistent with the perspectives of various researchers (Aaker, 1991; Rauyrueen et al., 2009; Rios & Riquelme, 2008), we adopt that B2B brand loyalty is positively associated with overall B2B brand equity.

In this way, we consider the following hypothesis for our model (see Figure 8):

H5. Brand image is positively related to B2B brand equity.

H6. Brand loyalty is positively related to B2B brand equity.

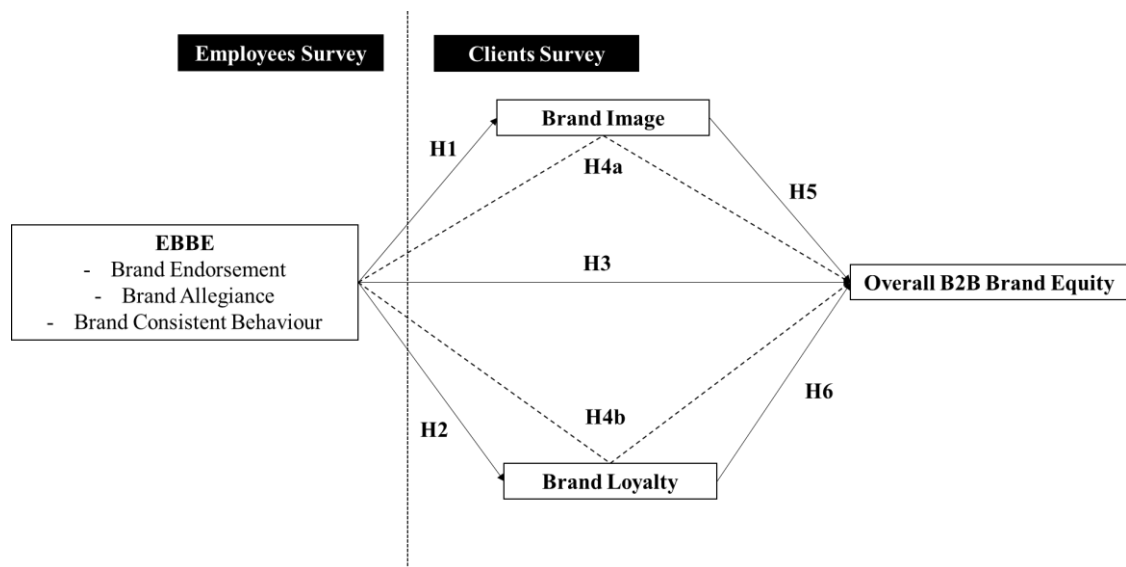


Figure 8 - EBBE - B2B Brand Equity Conceptual Model. Direct effects (□); Indirect effects (- - ->)

Source: Own Elaboration

4.3. Methods

Measurement Scales

Scales of previous authors that were found to be reliable and valid were used to measure this study's constructs. Overall B2B brand equity (3 items), brand image (5 items), and brand loyalty (2 items) were obtained from Keller, (1993), Davis et al., (2008, 2009), and Juntunen et al., (2011) previous studies. On the other hand, EBBE was measured with the King et al., (2012) scale (11 items).

Following the previous studies, a five-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree was used. The items used in each scale are shown in Table 14.

Sampling and Data Collection

This research was conducted in the B2B services industry, with the participation of four Portuguese companies. The study used a sample involving both customers and employees from these companies to measure overall B2B brand equity, brand image, brand loyalty, and EBBE. EBBE was evaluated through an employee survey, while data on overall B2B brand equity, brand image, and brand loyalty were collected through a survey targeting clients. The decision to collect EBBE data from employees and the remaining data from clients stems from the need to explore the perspectives of both

internal and external stakeholders. Our study also overcomes limitations identified in previous multilevel research within this domain, which predominantly relied on managerial perspectives for external brand equity assessments, neglecting the client viewpoint (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Liu et al., 2020).

Data collection involved sharing the online survey with the Marketing and HR leaders of these companies, who subsequently shared it with their employees and customer database via email, ensuring strict confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process.

After 1697 questionnaires were administered (936 for employees and 761 for customers), 491 employees completed the questionnaires, representing a 52% response rate for employees. Of the 761 customers surveyed, 366 viable responses were received, representing a 48% response rate for customers. Regarding the demographic profiles, we accounted for the gender of both employees and customers (1 = male; 2 = female). Additionally, we checked the employees' age and levels of education. 50.5% of the employee respondents are female, 30.3% of them have graduated, 32.2% are in the 41-50 age cohort, and 27% are in the 31-40 age cohort. Among clients, 78,1% are male and 54,4%. Table 13 summarizes the socio-demographic characterization of the participants.

Table 13 - Socio-demographic characterization of the participants

	Frequency (%)
Employees Gender	
Female	50,5%
Male	44,6%
Prefer not to say	4,9%
Employees Age	
30 or less	22%
31 to 40	27,1%
41 to 50	32,2%
51 to 60	15,9%

61 or more	2,9%
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Employees Education

6th grade	1,6%
9th grade	11,2%
High school	28,1%
Bachelor's degree	2,9%
Graduation	30,3%
Master's degree	8,4%
PhD	0,4%
Professional technical course	17,1%

Clients Gender

Female	19,1%
Male	78,1%
Prefer not to say	2,7%

Source: Own Elaboration

Data Analysis

Given the involvement of two distinct datasets and the analysis encompassing constructs at both the employee and client levels, the application of multilevel modeling was essential. The prevalence of multilevel models in social science research has grown significantly, recognizing the clustering and nesting of data in real-world scenarios, such as clients and employees (Liu et al., 2020; Wong, 2016). Over the past 15 years, scholars have turned to hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to tackle the multilevel phenomenon (Liu et al., 2020; Tsaur & Ku, 2019). However, HLM comes with limitations. Firstly, it estimates relationships in the model individually, resulting in a smaller degree of freedom (df) compared to simultaneous estimation of all paths. Secondly, simulation results indicate that using factor scores can lead to biased outcomes when paths are not estimated simultaneously, even with a large sample size (Devlieger & Rosseel, 2017).

In response to these limitations, a multilevel structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was employed in our study.

When evaluating a structural equation model, the methodological decision typically revolves around choosing between a covariance-based approach and partial-least-squares regression analysis. Traditionally, the former has been the prevailing method for addressing causal models of this nature. However, a shift has been observed among marketing and management researchers towards the latter option (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a; Hulland, 1999). As so, we used the partial least square (PLS) method of Smart PLS (V3.0) to test the relationships between variables that appeared in the structural model.

Regarding the data aggregation process, by using the assigned unique company code, employees' and clients' responses from the same company were matched. Employees' responses to each item were averaged within each company, and the mean was assigned to each client. Therefore, two data sets were combined into one.

The data from this study underwent an analysis, encompassing several steps. Initially, statistical analyses of variables and their respective measurement items were conducted using the SPSS software (v.25). Subsequently, an examination of the items measuring the constructs was undertaken to ensure measurement validity and reliability, along with a comprehensive test for common method bias. The structural model and hypotheses were tested through the bootstrapping techniques. Furthermore, mediating effects were thoroughly assessed using bootstrap analysis.

4.4. Results

Statistical description of variables

Regarding the B2B brand equity data, the participants generally exhibit positive perceptions across various constructs (see Table 14). Notably, the overall B2B brand equity scores relatively high ($M = 4.03$), suggesting a favorable assessment by respondents. The brand image also receives positive feedback with a mean of 4.34, indicating a strong and consistent brand image. Brand loyalty is notably high ($M = 4.41$), showcasing a robust commitment to the brand among respondents.

Table 14 - Statistical description of variables

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overall B2B Brand Equity	4,03**	0,901**
Be_1. We are willing to pay more in order to do business with this provider	3,56	1,159
BE_2. This provider's brand is different from other providers	4,32	0,782
BE_3. This provider's name gives them an advantage over other providers	4,23	0,763
Brand Image	4,34**	0,764**
BI_1. This provider is known as a company that takes good care of their customers.	4,37	0,772
BI_2. We can reliably predict how this provider will perform.	4,09	0,821
BI_3. In comparison with providers, this provider is known to consistently deliver very high quality	4,32	0,804
BI_4. In comparison with other providers. This provider is highly respected.	4,40	0,754
BI_5. This provider brand has a rich story.	4,53	0,669
Brand Loyalty	4,41**	0,753**
BL_1. Give an evaluation of your overall satisfaction with the operation of this provide.	4,34	0,737
BL_2. With high probability we will continue the relationship with our provider as long as possible	4,48	0,768
EBBE	4,21**	0,895**
EBBE_BE_1. I say positive things about the organization (brand) I work for	4,37	0,762
EBBE_BE_2. I would recommend the organization (brand) I work for to someone who seeks my advice	4,32	0,812
EBBE_BE_3. I enjoy talking about the organization (brand) I work for to others	4,24	0,924
EBBE_BE_4. I talk positively about the organization (brand) I work for to others	4,34	0,808
EBBE_BA_1. I plan to be with the organization I work for, for a while	4,29	0,911
EBBE_BA_2. I plan to be with the organization (brand) I work for five years from now	3,98	1,159
EBBE_BA_3. I would turn down an offer from another organization (brand) if it came tomorrow	3,39	1,157
EBBE_BA_4. I plan to stay longer with the organization (brand) I work for	4,15	0,977
EBBE_BCB_1. I demonstrate behaviour that is consistent with the brand promise of the organization I work for	4,46	0,729
EBBE_BCB_2. I consider the impact on my organization's brand before communicating or taking action in any situation	4,33	0,809

EBBE_BCB_3. I am always interested to learn about my organization's brand and what it means to me in my role 4,46

0,800

Note: ** Mean value of items that measure latent variables.

Source: Own Elaboration

EBBE scores are relatively high (M=4,21). Examining the EBBE components, positive employee endorsement (EBBE_BE) shows high mean scores, implying that employees are inclined to speak positively about and recommend their organization. The brand allegiance (EBBE_BA) results reveal mixed scores, reflecting a combination of long-term commitment plans and varied willingness to consider alternative offers. Furthermore, brand consistent behaviours (EBBE_BCB) receive high mean scores, indicating a strong alignment between employees and the brand promise.

Measures of Reliability and Validity

Initially, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the reflective nature of the structural model. In a reflective Partial Least Squares (PLS) model, the constructs serve as the shared cause of the items measuring them, and the observed constructs do not exert causal effects on their corresponding constructs (Ringle et al., 2020). All items demonstrate substantial confirmatory factor loads (>0.60), except for EBBE_BA_2, as outlined in Table 15. Given its negative factor load, this particular item will be excluded in subsequent steps of our analysis.

Table 15 - Confirmatory Factory Loads

	Brand Image	Brand Loyalty	EBBE	Overall Brand Equity
BE_1				0.943
BE_2				0.856
BE_3				0.946
BI_1	0.965			
BI_2	0.660			
BI_3	0.841			

BI_4	0.848
BI_5	0.833
BL_1	0.997
BL_2	0.997
EBBE_BA_1	0.929
EBBE_BA_2	-0.310
EBBE_BA_3	0.982
EBBE_BA_4	0.824
EBBE_BCB_1	0.988
EBBE_BCB_2	0.977
EBBE_BCB_3	0.973
EBBE_BE_1	0.997
EBBE_BE_2	0.986
EBBE_BE_3	0.661
EBBE_BE_4	0.989

Source: Own Elaboration

In evaluating the sample's reliability, we employed three key measures outlined by Hair et al., (2019): Cronbach's alpha (reference $\alpha > 0.70$), composite reliability (reference $CR > 0.70$), and average variance extracted (reference $AVE > 0.50$). As illustrated in Table 16, the results for Cronbach's alpha (Brand Image: 0.910, Brand Loyalty: 0.994, EBBE: 0.983, Overall Brand Equity: 0.903), composite reliability (Brand Image: 0.919, Brand Loyalty: 0.997, EBBE: 0.986, Overall Brand Equity: 0.940), and AVE (Brand Image: 0.698, Brand Loyalty: 0.994, EBBE: 0.876, Overall Brand Equity: 0.839) exceed the established reference thresholds, affirming the model's convergence and reliability.

Moreover, scrutinizing the Fornell–Larcker criterion presented in Table 16, the diagonal values highlighted in bold indicate the square root of the AVE for each variable, surpassing the correlation of each latent variable off the diagonal. This underscores the

presence of discriminant validity in the model, further bolstering the robustness and integrity of our analysis.

Table 16 - Model Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Brand Image	Brand Loyalty	EBBE	Overall Brand Equity
Brand Image	0.910	0.919	0.698	0.835			
Brand Loyalty	0.994	0.997	0.994		0.997		
EBBE	0.983	0.986	0.876			0.936	
Overall Brand Equity	0.903	0.940	0.839				0.916

Source: Own Elaboration

Finally, the Stone-Geisser Q^2 was computed to assess the predictive relevance of the model. The predictive relevance for forecasting Brand Image, Brand Loyalty, and Overall Brand Equity is determined by the values of Q^2 , which indicate the proportion of variance in each construct that the model can predict. The results reveal that the predictive relevance for Brand Image is 0.034, for Brand Loyalty is 0.096, and for Overall Brand Equity is high at 0.834. These positive Q^2 values signify that the model exhibits significant predictive relevance, particularly in forecasting Overall Brand Equity.

Structural Model Testing

First, the direct relationships of the structural model were tested through a bootstrapping analysis. We then performed a second bootstrapping analysis to measure the mediating effects of brand image and brand loyalty. The results of these two tests are shown in Figure 9.

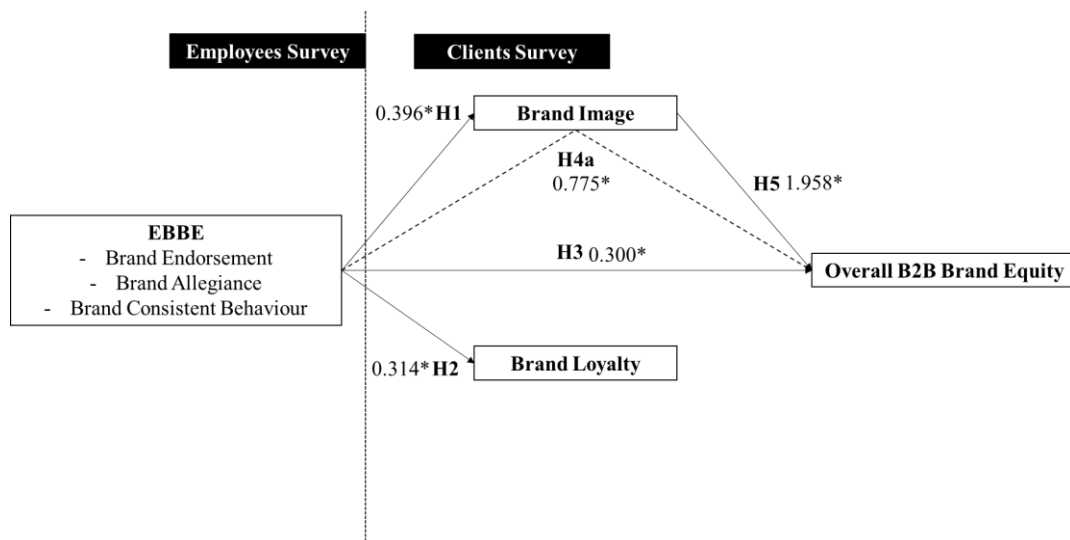


Figure 9 - Results of structural model testing. Note * $p < 0.001$; Direct effects (□); Indirect effects (- - ->)

Source: Own Elaboration

The findings (see Table 17) highlight a positive relationship between EBBE and brand image ($\beta = 0.396$), affirming H1. Additionally, EBBE exhibits positive associations with both brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.314$) and Overall B2B brand equity ($\beta = 0.300$), corroborating H2 and H3, respectively.

The positive impact of brand image on Overall B2B brand equity ($\beta = 1.958$) supports H4. However, contrary to expectations, brand loyalty demonstrates a negative effect on Overall B2B brand equity, leading to the rejection of H6.

Table 17- Results of the relationships between latent variables

Relationship	Support
H1: EBBE → Brand Image	Yes
H2: EBBE → Brand Loyalty	Yes
H3: EBBE → Overall B2B Brand Equity	Yes
H4a: EBBE → Brand Image → Overall B2B Brand Equity	Yes
H4b: EBBE → Brand Loyalty → Overall B2B Brand Equity	No
H5: Brand Image → Overall B2B Brand Equity	Yes
H6: Brand Loyalty → Overall B2B Brand Equity	No

Source: Own Elaboration

Upon scrutinizing the mediating effects, EBBE's positive influence on Overall B2B brand equity is confirmed when mediated by brand image ($\beta = 0.775$), validating H4a. The path coefficient for "EBBE -> Brand Image -> Overall Brand Equity" ($\beta = 0.775$) is larger than the path coefficient for "EBBE -> Overall Brand Equity" ($\beta = 0.300$). Therefore, the relationship between EBBE and Overall Brand Equity is stronger when mediated by

Brand Image. In contrast, H4b is rejected, as EBBE exhibits a negative influence on Overall B2B brand equity when mediated by brand loyalty.

4.5. Discussion

While the importance of brand equity in securing a competitive advantage for B2B firms is established, the significance of employees in shaping it within the B2B sector remained a relatively underexplored domain (Bendixen et al., 2004; Biedenbach et al., 2019; Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011). This study, motivated by the need to address existing gaps, seeks to unravel the nuanced outcomes of EBBE within B2B enterprises. By shedding light on the relationship of EBBE with the B2B realm, this research aims to provide valuable insights for firms striving to leverage their employees as strategic assets in enhancing brand success in an interconnected and dynamic business environment. Therefore, this study unravels the relationships between EBBE, B2B brand image, brand loyalty, and Overall B2B Brand Equity.

The results affirm the positive relationship between EBBE and B2B brand image (H1) and brand loyalty (H2). This underscores the significance of cultivating a strong internal brand perception among employees, translating into a positive external image (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Duh & Uford, 2019; King & Grace, 2009). Moreover, the positive relationship between EBBE and brand loyalty, emphasizes the impact of the employees on customer behaviour and commitment. The positive sentiments and advocacy cultivated internally through a high EBBE transcend internal boundaries, fostering brand loyalty among external stakeholders (Biedenbach et al., 2019; Ryan & Silvanto, 2013). These results underscore the strategic necessity for organizations to invest in initiatives that augment employee engagement and brand perception. Through such investments, businesses can strengthen their internal brand foundation, subsequently reaping the rewards of an enhanced positive brand image and heightened loyalty in the competitive B2B landscape.

Establishing a robust B2B brand requires anchoring the brand within the sentiments and thoughts of the workforce due to the unique nature of B2B interactions. Unlike B2C contexts, where external media often plays a pivotal role, B2B brand equity is heavily reliant on direct person-to-person engagements involving employees and customers (Biedenbach et al., 2019). This study's outcomes further demonstrated favorable connections between EBBE and Overall B2B brand equity (H3), particularly amplifying when influenced by brand image (H4a). In B2B transactions, trust, credibility, and

relationships are paramount, and these are significantly influenced by the employees who serve as brand ambassadors (Biedenbach et al., 2019). When employees embody and advocate for the brand values, it not only shapes the internal brand perception but also resonates outward, contributing significantly to the formation of a positive external image. This alignment between internal and external brand representations emphasizes the critical role employees play in shaping the overall brand equity of a B2B enterprise. Therefore, integrating internal employee-focused initiatives with external brand-building endeavors becomes imperative for a comprehensive and impactful brand strategy in the competitive B2B landscape.

Focusing on the clients' responses, the positive relationship of brand image on Overall B2B brand equity (H5), as supported by the robust path coefficient ($\beta = 1.958$), highlights the central role that a positive and compelling brand image plays in shaping the overall perception and value of a B2B brand. This is comprehensible since, as an example, Keller, (2011) proposes that corporate brand equity is constructed based on corporate image, and the facets of corporate image impact corporate brand equity (Juntunen et al., 2011). Focusing on initiatives ensuring a positive and consistent brand image, such as employee training, can potentially yield more impactful results than investing in expensive strategies aimed at improving brand awareness (Davis et al., 2008). This approach, as advocated by Davis et al. (2008), underscores the significance of internal brand-building efforts. Unlike conventional strategies that focus solely on enhancing brand awareness through costly advertising, investing in employee training programs can yield more impactful outcomes. By empowering employees with a deep understanding of brand values and messaging, organizations can ensure that their workforce becomes a cohesive force in embodying and promoting the brand ethos. The emphasis on employee training aligns with the idea that employees, as brand ambassadors, play a central role in shaping both internal and external brand perceptions.

The unexpected negative impact of brand loyalty on Overall B2B brand equity (H6), and as a mediator between EBBE and Overall B2B brand equity (H4b), challenges the conventional view of loyalty as an inherent component of brand equity. As mentioned by Juntunen et al., (2011) we may inquire whether there is adequate justification to view loyalty as an element of brand equity or as its consequence within B2B service markets. Yet, an alternative perspective posited by various researchers (Taylor et al., 2004; van Riel et al., 2005) contends that loyalty emerges as a consequence of brand equity. Brand loyalty frequently serves as a prominent brand equity outcome in industrial branding literature, often concluding an endogenous causal chain or as a single endogenous construct (Elsässer & Wirtz, 2017). Most researchers predominantly consider brand

loyalty as an outcome stemming from the other four dimensions of Aaker's brand equity framework, despite Aaker, (1991) modeling it as the fifth dimension, thereby influencing brand equity outcomes. These findings underscore the need for nuanced examinations within the B2B context, considering factors like complex relationships and evolving market dynamics. B2B interactions are often characterized by multifaceted connections and are influenced by a dynamic business environment. Therefore, a more detailed and context-specific analysis becomes crucial to capture the complexity and subtleties inherent in B2B brand equity dynamics. Future research should delve into these complexities to advance our understanding of brand loyalty and equity in B2B interactions.

Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the theoretical landscape of B2B branding by affirming the positive associations between EBBE and key B2B brand outcomes. The results establish a positive link between EBBE, brand image and B2B brand equity, emphasizing the pivotal role of employees to form positive external images in the B2B marketplace. Additionally, the study underscores the positive relationship between EBBE and brand loyalty, highlighting the intricate interplay between EBBE and external customer relationships within the B2B context. These outcomes extend and enrich existing theoretical frameworks by emphasizing the interconnectedness of internal and external brand representations and the far-reaching implications of cultivating internal brand foundations for external customer commitment. Moreover, the study's multilevel approach, considering both internal employee perspectives and external brand outcomes, introduces a nuanced understanding of the dynamics within B2B branding. This study also contributes by empirically testing the B2B brand equity model. While it marks progress in unravelling the complexities of these interactions, the findings underscore the necessity for future research to delve deeper into the dynamics between B2B brand equity and loyalty.

Managerial implications

The study underscores the crucial role of employees in shaping external brand perceptions in B2B contexts. To leverage these insights, organizations are advised to strategically invest in initiatives that enhance employee engagement and align with the desired brand image. This includes implementing targeted employee training programs, fostering a brand-aligned internal culture, and integrating employee initiatives with external brand-building efforts. By adopting a holistic approach, B2B firms can

strengthen their internal brand foundation, cultivate positive external brand images, and enhance loyalty in a competitive landscape. Employee advocacy programs, transforming employees into brand ambassadors, are recommended. It is crucial for B2B firms to implement integrated branding strategies that align internal and external brand representations. This involves ensuring that externally communicated brand values resonate with employee experiences and perceptions. Achieving this alignment requires internal communication, training programs, and a workplace culture that reinforces the brand identity. To sum up, the results underscore the strategic need for organizations to prioritize employee-centric initiatives, aligning internal and external brand representations to achieve a comprehensive and impactful brand strategy.

4.6. Conclusion

Using a multilevel approach, this study delves into the multifaceted realm of B2B brand equity, shedding light on the intricate interplay between EBBE and key B2B brand outcomes. The findings contribute to our understanding of how internal brand cultivation influences external brand perceptions, equity, and loyalty.

The positive associations identified between EBBE and key B2B brand outcomes, such as brand image, brand equity, and brand loyalty, underscore the pivotal role of employees as brand ambassadors (Biedenbach et al., 2019). The study aligns with the emerging recognition that in the contemporary B2B landscape, brand building is not merely an external endeavor but is significantly influenced by the internal dynamics of the organization.

This research makes another contribution by empirically testing the B2B brand equity model. The findings emphasize the need for future research to explore further the dynamics linking B2B brand equity and loyalty. This call for deeper investigation underscores the evolving nature of B2B brand relationships and the need for continued scholarly inquiry in this dynamic field.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without its limitations. The limited sample size and potential sampling bias pose notable constraints on the generalizability of the empirical findings. Additionally, the fieldwork's exclusive focus on one European country further limits the broader applicability of the study's results. Additionally, its cross-sectional nature captures a snapshot in time, limiting the ability to establish causality.

Future research should explore these dynamics across diverse industries and employ longitudinal designs for a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving nature of B2B brand equity.

In addition, possible variations in the EBBE between B2B and B2C environments have not been accounted for in the current model. It is recommended that future research explores and integrates these distinctions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of EBBE dynamics.

Moreover, the study suggests extending the scope of research to establish links between EBBE and B2B tangible financial outcomes, such as turnovers, profits, and shareholder value. This expansion would contribute valuable insights into the broader impact of EBBE on a company's financial performance.

PART III

CHAPTER 5 - Conclusion

The collection of studies presented in this research aims to fulfill the overarching goal of this thesis: to comprehend the interplay between EBBE and its ramifications on the branding dynamics within the B2B sector, delineating the antecedents of EBBE, and observing its influence on the brand equity of B2B firms.

To achieve the overarching goal, three distinct objectives were delineated, each correlating to one of the three chapters within Part II. Namely: 1) Identify the literature that elucidates the historical evolution, foundational models, determinants, and impacts of EBBE; 2) Analyse the influence of brand-specific transformational leadership and employer branding in EBBE in the B2B sector; 3) Analyse the influence of EBBE on B2B brand image, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity. This section will highlight the key findings from these chapters. Insights gathered from these investigations have contributed to developing a model (From the Inside Out: EBBE in the B2B field), which will be unveiled. Contributions to both theory and practice will be discussed. Additionally, we will outline the limitations encountered during these studies and propose directions for future research. Lastly, we will summarize the accomplishments of this doctoral thesis.

5.1 Main Research Finding and Model Creation

This subsection encapsulates the main findings derived from the research conducted in Part II of the doctoral dissertation.

Chapter 2 embarks on a deep dive into EBBE, guided by a thorough systematic literature review that traces the evolution of EBBE from its origins in 2009 up to April 2023, when we conclude the article. By scrutinizing 30 research papers sourced from Scopus and Web of Science, this chapter aims to clarify EBBE's historical development, its foundational frameworks, essential determinants, and notable effects within the realm of business. With this article, three distinct thematic clusters of EBBE were found: Model, Causes and General Effects of EBBE; The Role of Culture, Leadership and Context in EBBE; and The Role of Brand Management in EBBE, each providing a granular look at different facets of EBBE's growth, impact on organizational performance, and the internal and external elements influencing its formation, thereby achieving the first specific objective of this thesis.

With the initial thematic cluster, it was possible to uncover the roots of EBBE, highlighting the foundational work of King & Grace, (2009) who introduced EBBE as a crucial precursor to both Customer-Based Brand Equity and Financial Brand Equity. Their model emphasizes the significance of internal brand management as a key driver of organizational achievement—a notion that subsequent research across diverse cultural contexts affirmed, showcasing EBBE's extensive relevance and its capacity to impact executive compensation, enhance employee engagement on social media platforms, and foster brand co-creation efforts (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Duh & Uford, 2019; Smith et al., 2021; N. Tavassoli, 2008). With the second thematic cluster, some insights were made, namely the profound influence of organizational culture, and the distinction between transformational and transactional leadership styles, as well as the significance of the environmental context in cultivating EBBE. This analysis illuminates the crucial necessity of harmonizing organizational culture with brand values and accentuates the pivotal role of effective leadership in assimilating the brand identity among employees (Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021; Mavuso et al., 2020; Poulis & Wisker, 2016). Meanwhile, with the third cluster, some main findings were also found, namely the strategic significance of brand management practices in fostering EBBE. This cluster examines the impact of brand identity, internal marketing, and consistent brand communication on enhancing EBBE and, by extension, Customer-Based Brand Equity and financial results. It underscores the importance of aligning brand management efforts with employees' perceptions and values to maximize effectiveness (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015; Deepa & Baral, 2021; Kristanti, 2017; Sarangal, 2018; Yang et al., 2015).

Considering the main findings of this chapter, it was also possible to create an integrative framework, capturing the complexity and depth of EBBE. This framework delineates a rich tapestry of antecedents and results that define EBBE. The framework delineates the foundational antecedents of EBBE commencing with Internal Brand Management (IBM), which comprises information management, the propagation of brand knowledge, and the integral human factor, denoted as the 'H' factor (King & Grace, 2009, 2010). These are augmented by a lucid delineation of roles and a deep-seated commitment to the brand, coupled with participation in Internal Marketing activities, laying the groundwork for EBBE (Huang & Lai, 2021; Sarangal, 2018). Moreover, the constructs of brand identity, relevance, importance, and the brand's reputation and prestige constitute elements of EBBE antecedents (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015; Xiong et al., 2013). In the vein of leadership, brand-specific transformational leadership is instrumental, interwoven with social responsibility and corporate values, in influencing EBBE (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Lee et al., 2020; Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021). The

culmination of this intricate interplay of antecedents and mechanisms leads to tangible results. EBBE extends its reach to influence Customer-Based Brand Equity and Financial-Based Brand Equity, fostering a customer orientation culture within organizations (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010a; Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015; King & Grace, 2009, 2010). There's also observable internal dissemination of the brand among colleagues, driving organizational performance and employee satisfaction (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Poulis & Wisker, 2016; Wisker & Kwiatek, 2019). The ripple effect of EBBE even touches on the financial aspects of a company, evident in the reduction of executive salary costs and in shaping new models of leadership (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Lee et al., 2020; Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021; N. Tavassoli, 2008).

With this chapter, it was also possible to make some conclusions about future research directions. The 30 articles analyzed suggest a broadening of EBBE studies across diverse sectors, particularly emphasizing the need for a stronger presence in industrial and B2B settings, alongside service companies (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Duh & Uford, 2019; Etim & Uford, 2019; King & Grace, 2009). Recommendations call for a geographically expansive and sector-diverse application of the EBBE model to capture varied market dynamics and employee-brand interactions. There is a noted call for methodological diversity, advocating for an increase in qualitative, case study, and longitudinal research to enrich the understanding of EBBE. A recurring theme is the interrelation between EBBE and other forms of brand equity, such as Customer-Based Brand Equity and Financial Brand Equity, to unravel their collective impact on strategic brand positioning and organizational performance (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020b; N. T. Tavassoli et al., 2014). The insights point toward the significance of examining the influence of internal marketing initiatives, employee seniority, and leadership styles on EBBE, underscoring the need for a comprehensive and integrative approach to brand management within organizations (Lee et al., 2020; Maleki Minbashrazgah et al., 2021).

Chapter 3 delves into the intricate dynamics of B2B branding, exploring the nuanced relationships between Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership (TFL), Employer Branding, and EBBE within the B2B sector. Anchored in quantitative research, this analysis draws upon data collected from employees across various B2B service companies, employing the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method within the Smart PLS (V. 3.0) software to test the interconnections between these constructs. Central to the findings is the revelation of significant positive correlations between Brand-Specific TFL and the multifaceted dimensions of Employer Branding, further extending to the relationship between Employer Branding and EBBE. The research notably underscores

the enhancement of the link between Brand-Specific TFL and EBBE when Employer Branding assumes a mediating role. Such insights affirm the crucial influence of effective Employer Branding strategies in magnifying the impact of leadership on fostering a robust EBBE (Deepa & Baral, 2021).

Delving deeper, the study systematically validates the hypothesis positing a direct and positive relationship between Brand-Specific TFL and EBBE, thereby underscoring the transformative power of visionary leadership in elevating employee perceptions and engagement with the brand (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Morhart et al., 2009). This relationship is further explained through the mediation of Employer Branding, highlighting how Brand-Specific TFL enriches employer branding efforts, which in turn, significantly elevates EBBE. Moreover, the chapter extends the discourse by dissecting the influence of Brand-Specific TFL on various facets of Employer Branding, illustrating how transformational leaders shape the employer brand perception, thereby influencing EBBE positively (Lee et al., 2020; Morhart et al., 2009). Through a granular analysis, the study brings to light how Brand-Specific TFL fosters a conducive organizational climate, propels training and development initiatives, and instills ethical practices and corporate social responsibility—each contributing to a vibrant Employer Branding landscape and, subsequently, a fortified EBBE. In encapsulating the empirical findings and theoretical insights, Chapter 4 enriches the academic landscape with a nuanced understanding of the symbiotic relationship between leadership, employer branding, and EBBE in the B2B context.

Chapter 4 explores the interactions of EBBE in the context of B2B branding, embarking on a comprehensive exploration aimed at uncovering how EBBE influences brand image, brand loyalty, and overall B2B brand equity. This research adopts a multilevel approach, drawing on data gathered from both employees and clients of B2B firms. The study crafts a comprehensive conceptual model. This model is poised to dissect and illuminate the nuanced interactions and impacts of EBBE on the broader B2B branding landscape.

At the heart of the study's findings is the affirmation of EBBE as an influencer in the construction of a positive brand image, the enhancement of brand loyalty, and overall B2B brand equity. These pivotal relationships underline the indispensable role EBBE plays in not just shaping a compelling brand image but also in fostering deep-rooted brand loyalty, collectively contributing to the robustness of B2B brand equity (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020b; King & Grace, 2009). Such insights beckon B2B firms to leverage the latent potential of EBBE as a strategic asset in elevating their brand's prominence and competitive edge in the marketplace (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020b;

King & Grace, 2009; Poulis & Wisker, 2016; Wisker & Kwiatek, 2019). By unearthing the favorable connections between EBBE and overall B2B brand equity, especially the mediating role of brand image, the study underscores the foundational importance of aligning internal and external brand narratives. This alignment not only nurtures trust and credibility in B2B interactions but also significantly contributes to the construction of a resilient and positive brand equity.

Consequently, the study advocates for a holistic brand management approach that harmonizes internal employee-focused initiatives with external brand-building efforts. This integrated strategy is essential for cultivating a coherent and impactful brand identity that resonates across the B2B spectrum. In conclusion, Chapter 4 extends the academic discourse on the critical role of EBBE within the B2B context, offering a detailed examination of how EBBE influences key brand outcomes. Through a nuanced exploration of the relationships between EBBE, brand image, brand loyalty, and overall B2B brand equity, this chapter not only enriches our theoretical understanding but also provides a foundational framework for future research into the complex dynamics of B2B branding.

The main findings of this doctoral thesis synthesize the exploratory and multilevel analysis of the dynamic interplay between EBBE and its influence on Branding Dynamics within the B2B sector. The empirical findings underscore the pivotal role of brand-specific TFL and employer branding in influencing EBBE. Also, it has been demonstrated that the strategic nurturing of EBBE within organizations leads to positive outcomes, including the development of a compelling brand image, the strengthening of brand loyalty among customers, and a positive influence on the B2B overall brand equity. This thesis has identified and examined the mechanisms through which EBBE influences these key facets of B2B branding, offering deep insights into the symbiotic relationship between EBBE and its external manifestations. The outcomes of this doctoral thesis enabled the development of the model “From the Inside Out: EBBE in the B2B field” (Figure 10).

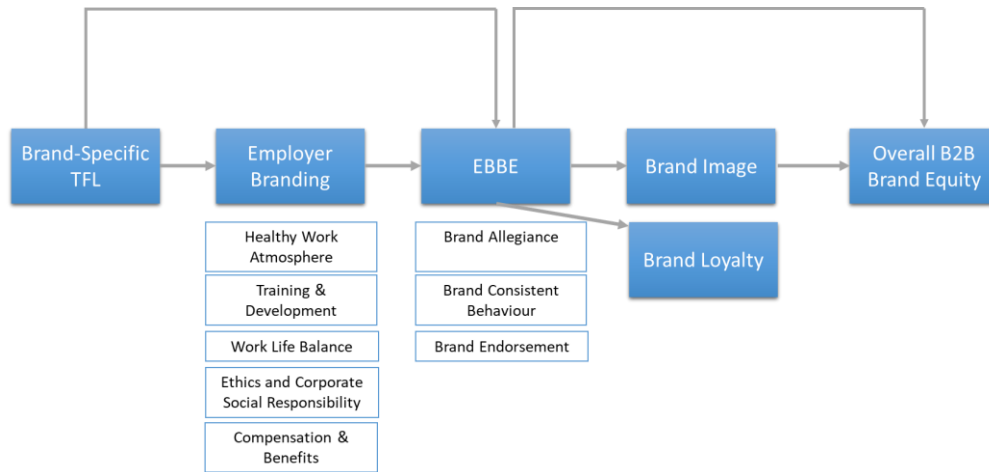


Figure 10 - From the Inside Out: EBBE in the B2B field

Source: Own Elaboration

The conceptual model, represented graphically in Figure 10, offers an insightful look into the multifaceted nature of EBBE within the B2B sector, weaving together various components that play a fundamental role in determining overall B2B brand equity. It is a framework that navigates through the intricacies of brand-specific TFL, employer branding, and the resultant brand equity as perceived internally by employees and externally in the broader market. In an academic context, this model serves as a blueprint for dissecting the composite elements that contribute to EBBE and their subsequent impact on the perception and performance of B2B brands.

At the onset, brand-specific TFL is posited as a foundational influence. This dimension emphasizes the role of leaders who, with their visionary approach, inspire employees to align with the brand's mission and values (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Lee et al., 2020; Morhart et al., 2009). The ability of such leaders to imbue a sense of brand identity and pride among employees cannot be overstated. Transformational leaders act as catalysts, sparking the intrinsic motivation within employees to exceed their transactional roles and engage more deeply with the brand, thereby reinforcing the EBBE (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020a; Lee et al., 2020; Morhart et al., 2009).

Employer branding, influenced by brand-specific TFL, comprises facets that contribute to a healthy organizational climate and culture. This involves not just a salutary work environment but extends to training and development, work-life balance, ethics, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and fair compensation and benefits. These components of employer branding serve as the mechanisms through which brand-specific TFL can exercise its impact, shaping an employer brand that resonates with

employees' personal and professional values. The interplay between TFL and employer branding, thus, becomes a vital intersection for organizational focus, as it influences EBBE.

Moving forward in the model, EBBE is the fulcrum around which subsequent elements pivot. EBBE encapsulates the collective influence of internal brand perceptions and behaviours on the brand's value. The three dimensions of EBBE are Brand Allegiance, Brand Consistent Behaviour, and Brand Endorsement (King & Grace, 2009). Brand Allegiance relates to the loyalty employees feel towards the brand, which often manifests in their dedication and advocacy. Brand Consistent Behaviour refers to the alignment of employees' actions with the brand's messaging and values, while Brand Endorsement is indicative of employees' willingness to positively promote the brand. These constructs not only reflect the internal health of the brand but also serve as precursors to external brand image and loyalty (King & Grace, 2009).

Brand Image and Brand Loyalty are influenced by EBBE in the external marketplace. Brand Image refers to the perception of the brand held by customers and stakeholders, heavily influenced by the internal advocacy and behaviour of employees (Davis et al., 2009; Juntunen et al., 2011; Keller & Webster, 2004). Brand Loyalty, on the other hand, reflects the commitment and preference that customers develop towards the brand, often as a direct result of their interactions with brand-aligned employees (J.-H. Kim & Hyun, 2011; Steenkamp et al., 2020).

Finally, the culmination point of this model is Overall B2B Brand Equity. Overall B2B Brand Equity represents the tangible and intangible benefits that a firm gains from its brand's strength in the marketplace, encompassing market share, price premium, customer satisfaction, and brand differentiation (Davis et al., 2009; Juntunen et al., 2011; Keller & Webster, 2004) As we can see in Figure 10, Overall B2B Brand Equity is positively influenced by EBBE and brand image.

In practical terms, this model provides a strategic roadmap for organizations aiming to harness the power of their human capital to build and sustain brand equity. It underscores the need for businesses to invest in transformational leadership development, foster an employer brand that aligns with the values of their employees, and cultivate a workplace environment that encourages brand advocacy and alignment. This approach is particularly crucial in the B2B sector, where the sales process is complex and relationships with customers are often long-term engagements predicated on trust, reliability, and brand reputation (Biedenbach et al., 2019). For academia, the

model presents a fertile ground for future research to explore the nuances and causal relationships between its components.

In summary, the model is a testament to the interconnected nature of internal and external branding. It provides a lens through which both practitioners and scholars can view the composite elements of brand equity, offering a holistic perspective on how to leverage internal assets to achieve brand success. It reaffirms the philosophy that a strong brand is built from the inside out, with employees as pivotal ambassadors who propel the brand's value in the competitive B2B marketplace.

5.2 Contributions

5.2.1 Theoretical contributions

The theoretical implications derived from each of the three studies—discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4—are synthesized and interconnected. Central to each study is the exploration of EBBE, highlighting its diverse impacts across various dimensions of B2B branding. This synthesis not only consolidates findings from individual chapters but also emphasizes the interconnections that enhance our understanding of EBBE's role in the broader business context.

The inaugural article within this doctoral thesis makes a theoretical contribution to the academic sphere, primarily by deepening our understanding of EBBE. This examination not only augments the scholarly dialogue on brand equity but serves as a compass pointing toward uncharted territories where further investigation is warranted. Through a methodical systematization of the existing literature, this paper crystallizes the genesis and trajectory of EBBE since its inception, charting a course for future inquiries. By uncovering the main research gaps—such as the intersection of EBBE with Customer-Based Brand Equity and Financial Brand Equity, the precursory role of corporate culture, the imprint of leadership styles, and the influence of context and employee traits on EBBE—the study forges a theoretical fulcrum for subsequent empirical endeavors. The proposed integrative framework of EBBE, which emerged from this paper, stands as a testament to its originality. It provides a structured approach to navigating the EBBE concept, offering tangible pathways for future research and practical application in the business realm. In sum, this first systematic review on EBBE infuses new vigor into the brand equity discourse, enriching theoretical foundations and sowing seeds for new explorations.

The second article within this thesis enriches the theoretical landscape concerning the mechanisms underpinning EBBE in the realm of B2B interactions. The study's academic contributions are twofold: it deepens the conceptual grasp of EBBE and elucidates the pathways through which brand-specific TFL and employer branding influence EBBE. A theoretical contribution of this study lies in its empirical validation of the connections among brand-specific TFL, employer branding, and EBBE. It sheds light on the nuanced ways in which leadership directly sways the perceptions and attitudes of employees toward their organization's brand. This investigation not only supplements but also extends the corpus of brand equity literature, highlighting the nuanced role of employer branding as a crucial intermediary that captures and enhances the influence of brand-specific TFL on EBBE. The research spotlights the significance of considering both leadership and employer branding as integral cogs in the wheel of brand management within B2B firms. It underscores the vital part they play in sculpting EBBE, contributing to the creation of a more robust and theoretically grounded understanding of the factors that foster EBBE development. Furthermore, this research paves the way for subsequent academic work by filling a critical void in the literature. It beckons future scholarly endeavors to traverse this relatively less-trodden path, examining the influence of leadership and employer branding on EBBE in B2B settings. In sum, the study fortifies the theoretical edifice of EBBE by offering fresh insights into the symbiotic relationship between brand-specific TFL and employer branding.

The third article within this thesis makes a theoretical advancement in the domain of B2B brand equity by empirically validating a comprehensive conceptual model. This model not only encapsulates the dimensions of B2B brand equity but ingeniously integrates the often-overlooked dimension of EBBE, unveiling the intricate interrelations and mutual influence these aspects exert upon each other. At the core of the theoretical advancements provided by this research is the establishment of the multifaceted relationship between EBBE and B2B brand outcomes. The study affirms the influence between a strong internal brand perception among employees and the projection of this perception outward to create a favorable brand image, which serves as a cornerstone for the brand's equity in the marketplace. Furthermore, the investigation into the positive association between EBBE and brand loyalty accentuates the complex tapestry woven by EBBE and external customer relationships, suggesting that employees' engagement with the brand is not confined within organizational boundaries but extends to influence customer perceptions and loyalty. The research contributes to existing theoretical frameworks by spotlighting the essentiality of an integrated approach to brand management within B2B firms. It emphasizes the need for a synchronized effort that

aligns internal brand-building with external branding strategies, thereby fostering a coherent and powerful brand representation that resonates with both employees and customers. The novel multilevel perspective adopted in this study—juxtaposing internal employee insights against external brand outcomes—enriches our comprehension of B2B branding dynamics, thereby challenging conventional approaches and offering a more granulated view of how internal branding efforts translate into external brand equity. In charting these unexplored waters, the research posits a theoretical proposition, encapsulating the critical interdependencies between internal employee branding efforts and external customer-centric brand outcomes. It encourages the recalibration of B2B brand equity models to include EBBE as a fundamental component, thus advocating for a more holistic and encompassing approach to the construction and evaluation of brand equity.

To sum up, the theoretical contributions of this thesis coalesce to advance our understanding of brand equity within B2B contexts, painting a comprehensive picture of the intricate interplay between internal branding efforts and external brand perceptions. The first article lays the groundwork by systematizing EBBE, highlighting its genesis and evolution as a pivotal factor in brand management. The second article builds on this foundation, illustrating how brand-specific TFL and employer branding act as catalysts, enhancing EBBE. The third article ties these threads together, empirically demonstrating the multilevel impacts of EBBE on brand image, loyalty, and overall B2B brand equity, urging a more nuanced and integrated approach to internal and external brand alignment. Together, these articles enrich the academic discourse and set a comprehensive research agenda for exploring the symbiotic relationship between employee perceptions, leadership, branding practices, and brand equity in the B2B sector.

5.2.2 Practical contributions

This thesis provides multiple practical insights, with each of its three articles offering distinct applications for industry practice. These insights are synthesized to form a comprehensive understanding of how they uniquely contribute to enhancing industry practices through the lens of EBBE. This integration of practical knowledge underscores the diverse yet interconnected ways in which each study informs and advances industry applications.

The practical implications derived from the first article of this thesis underscore the necessity for organizations to craft and disseminate their brand messages in ways that

resonate deeply and personally with their employees. The article elucidates that replicating customer-centric branding strategies for internal audiences is inadequate. It calls for a nuanced approach to brand communication that accounts for employee identities, crafting messages that are both meaningful and aligned with their perceptions and roles within the company. Furthermore, it highlights the indispensable role of leadership in effectively conveying brand values and the significance of a brand-aligned organizational culture and context. By holistically examining and optimizing these factors, organizations can cultivate EBBE which in turn reinforces Customer Based Brand Equity and augments overall financial performance. The insights provided here are instrumental for companies seeking to not only communicate their brand internally but also to integrate brand values into the very fabric of their corporate culture and leadership practices, thereby achieving a robust and sustainable competitive advantage.

For B2B enterprises seeking to elevate their brand's influence and competitive stance, the second study in this thesis presents actionable practical implications. Central to these is the criticality of nurturing brand-specific TFL. This investment in leadership development not only shapes the brand's perception internally but also culminates in the enhancement of EBBE. The research also underlines the impact of strategic employer branding, emphasizing the need for coherent and compelling narratives that align with the intrinsic values and professional aspirations of the employees. This demands a presentation of not just career progression opportunities, but also a reinforcement of the organizational ethos that facilitates a cohesive and engaged workplace. Furthermore, the study calls for an integrated approach to brand management, merging leadership development with employer branding and consistent brand promotion efforts. Such an integrated strategy must aim for a harmonious alignment of internal practices with the brand's external image, ensuring consistency at every point of employee interaction. Through these concerted efforts, B2B firms can foster a brand-centric culture that permeates through employee attitudes and behaviours, thereby strengthening their brand's presence and performance in the marketplace.

The findings from the third article of this thesis illuminate the strategic value of employees as key influencers in the perception of a brand within the B2B sector. Organizations are encouraged to capitalize on these insights by dedicating resources to enhance employee engagement and ensure alignment with the overarching brand image, fostering a symbiotic relationship between the internal brand culture and external branding efforts. The implementation of focused employee training programs emerges as a vital initiative, aiming to imbue employees with a thorough understanding of the brand values and messaging. The development of such programs is important in shaping employees into

brand advocates, a process which not only fortifies the internal brand identity but also translates into a reinforced brand image in the wider marketplace. Further recommended are employee advocacy initiatives, which are instrumental in transforming employees into active brand champions. The success of such programs hinges on the synchronization of internal and external brand narratives, thus necessitating robust internal communication frameworks and a workplace culture that is reflective of and reinforces the brand identity. In conclusion, the study accentuates the importance for B2B organizations to integrate employee-centric approaches within their broader branding strategy. Such integration is pivotal in achieving a holistic brand equity that resonates across all customer touchpoints, thereby ensuring a unified and compelling brand presence in the competitive B2B landscape.

The practical implications of this thesis highlight the importance of EBBE, brand-specific TFL, and employer branding as foundational pillars for forging a competitive edge in the B2B landscape. Across the three studies, a consistent theme emerges: the necessity of aligning internal brand perceptions with external branding initiatives to enhance brand equity. Key strategies include investing in leadership programs that foster brand-specific TFL behaviors, implementing targeted employee training to deepen brand understanding, and executing employer branding initiatives that resonate with employee values. Furthermore, the importance of developing employee advocacy programs highlights the need for a holistic brand management approach, integrating internal and external strategies to ensure a coherent and impactful brand representation. Collectively, these insights offer a roadmap for B2B firms to leverage their internal resources effectively, enhancing brand performance and securing a sustainable competitive edge in the marketplace.

5.3 Limitations and Future Lines of Research

Every scientific study inherently comes with its own set of limitations, and these limitations must be clearly stated to ensure an accurate interpretation of the findings. Outlining these constraints showcases meticulousness and helps pinpoint directions for future research (Greener, 2018).

The investigation outlined in our first article, while providing substantial insights into the EBBE concept, antecedents, and results, is not without its limitations. Primarily, the systematic literature review's scope was confined to articles sourced from two major scientific databases: SCOPUS and Web of Science (WoS). Although these platforms are

renowned for their comprehensive collection of peer-reviewed literature, they do not encompass the entirety of available research. This selective approach may have inadvertently excluded relevant studies published in other databases or journals not indexed by SCOPUS or WoS, potentially skewing the review's breadth and depth. Additionally, the study's design was constrained by its focus on literature published only up to April 2023. Considering that the thesis was submitted one year after this cut-off date, it is important to acknowledge that significant contributions to the field of EBBE may have emerged in the interim. This gap underscores the evolving nature of academic research and the potential for new insights that were not included within the scope of this study. This limitation underscores the dynamic and evolving landscape of brand equity research, suggesting the necessity for ongoing reviews to capture the latest developments and theoretical advancements. In light of these constraints, future research avenues are recommended to expand the analytical scope beyond SCOPUS and WoS, incorporating additional databases such as EBSCO. Including a variety of academic and grey literature, like conference proceedings, book chapters, and industry reports, would offer a more comprehensive perspective of the field. Further exploration is also urged to address the identified research gaps more thoroughly. This includes conducting qualitative, multilevel, and longitudinal studies to enrich our understanding of EBBE's nuances and complexities. Testing the EBBE model across diverse countries, regions, and industrial sectors would provide valuable insights into its applicability and effectiveness in varying cultural and business contexts.

The study "In the Heart of B2B Branding: Exploring the Link Between Brand-Specific Transformational Leadership, Employer Branding, and Employee-Based Brand Equity" advances our comprehension of the intricate relationships within B2B brand management. Yet, it encounters several limitations that future inquiries must consider to enhance the robustness and applicability of its findings. Primarily, the research's confines to a singular B2B service sector context raise questions about the universality of the observed outcomes. This specificity suggests that the interplay between brand-specific TFL, employer branding, and EBBE might exhibit variances when applied to different industries or market environments. Hence, subsequent studies should extend this examination across varied sectors to validate the model's relevance and adaptability to diverse business landscapes. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data, a common approach in social sciences, introduces inherent biases—such as social desirability or respondent's interpretation of survey questions—that might skew the results. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study. While providing valuable insights into the relationships between the constructs at a specific point in time, it falls short of

capturing the dynamic and evolving essence of EBBE in B2B contexts. Longitudinal studies, offering temporal depth, would significantly contribute to our understanding of how these relationships develop and change over time, offering insights into causality and the enduring impact of leadership and branding initiatives. This investigation also narrowed its focus to the direct connections between brand-specific TFL, employer branding, and EBBE, omitting potential mediating factors that could further elucidate these relationships. Future research should consider variables such as organizational culture, the seniority and demographic profiles of employees, and how these factors might mediate or moderate the studied relationships. Exploring these additional dimensions would provide a more holistic view of the mechanisms at play in nurturing EBBE within B2B organizations. Lastly, the employment of quantitative methods, while instrumental in validating the proposed hypotheses, might benefit from augmentation through qualitative research. In-depth interviews, case studies, or ethnographic methods could offer richer, more nuanced insights into how leadership and branding strategies are perceived and enacted by individuals within organizations. This mixed-methods approach would not only validate existing findings but also unearth underlying themes and perspectives not readily captured through survey instruments. Addressing these limitations in future studies promises not only to refine the theoretical frameworks proposed but also to offer practical guidance tailored to the complexities and specificities of B2B branding strategies.

The third paper, "From Within: How Employee-Based Brand Equity Influences B2B Brand Equity - A Multilevel Study," sheds light on the critical influence of EBBE on B2B Brand Equity. Nevertheless, the investigation encounters several limitations that future research must address to broaden the understanding and applicability of its conclusions. The study's reliance on a limited sample size, drawn from a single European country, significantly hampers the generalizability of its findings. This geographical concentration and potential sampling bias restrict the ability to extrapolate the study's results to other contexts or regions, underscoring the necessity for research across a more diverse array of locations and cultural settings. Expanding the geographical scope of future studies would enhance the relevance and applicability of the EBBE model across different global B2B markets. Moreover, the cross-sectional design of the research, while providing valuable insights at a particular moment, falls short of capturing the dynamic nature and evolution of brand equity within B2B environments. Longitudinal research methodologies would offer a deeper understanding of how EBBE and B2B brand equity relationships develop over time, potentially unveiling causal pathways and the long-term effects of branding initiatives. Another critical aspect not fully explored in the study is the

differentiation between EBBE dynamics in B2B versus B2C environments. Given the distinct characteristics and customer engagement strategies of B2B and B2C markets, future research needs to delineate and incorporate these variances. Understanding these differences would enrich the theoretical model of EBBE, ensuring its adaptability and effectiveness across various market settings. Furthermore, the study primarily focuses on the impact of EBBE on brand equity without thoroughly investigating its tangible financial outcomes. Future inquiries should aim to link EBBE directly to quantifiable business metrics, such as revenue growth, profitability, and shareholder value, among B2B firms. This would not only validate the significance of EBBE in contributing to a firm's bottom line but also provide compelling evidence to encourage businesses to invest in employee branding strategies. In conclusion, while this study marks a significant advancement in our understanding of EBBE's role in shaping B2B brand equity, addressing these outlined limitations through future research endeavors would significantly contribute to both theoretical and practical knowledge. By exploring a wider geographic scope, employing longitudinal designs, differentiating between B2B and B2C dynamics, and establishing links to financial outcomes, future studies can offer a more nuanced, comprehensive, and actionable framework for leveraging EBBE in the competitive B2B landscape.

This doctoral thesis explores various dimensions of EBBE within the B2B context, culminating in a set of comprehensive findings across three pivotal studies. To synthesize and streamline the future research directions identified through these studies, table 18 presents a consolidated view of suggested research avenues. These suggestions span across methodological diversification, geographic and sectorial expansion, longitudinal analysis, and deeper dives into the interrelations between EBBE and its impact on brand and financial performance. The table aims to guide future scholarly endeavors in further exploring the rich landscape of EBBE, offering a structured pathway for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical application in the field of brand management.

Table 18 - Future Research Agenda

Future Research Area	Suggestions	Related Article
Systematic literature review with expansion of research sources	Expand the analytical scope to include more recent articles and different databases such as EBSCO, and incorporate a variety of academic and grey literature, including conference proceedings, book chapters, and industry reports, to provide a more comprehensive perspective of the field.	Article 1

Model Testing in Various Sectors	Test the EBBE model in more countries, regions, and sectors such as industry to deepen the understanding of EBBE's connection with other brand equity outcomes.	Article 1
Deeper Examination of Brand Equity Components	Further investigate the connections between EBBE and other dimensions of brand equity, such as customer-based brand equity (CBBE) and financial brand equity (FBBE).	Article 1
Diverse Industry Settings	Explore the dynamics of brand-specific TFL, employer branding, and EBBE across different industry settings to address the limitation of specific context research.	Article 1,2
Alternative Research Methodologies	Incorporate qualitative methods and other mediators and moderators like organizational culture, employees' seniority, and demographic characteristics in EBBE research.	Article 1, 2
Longitudinal Studies	Employ longitudinal research designs to understand the evolving nature and long-term effects of EBBE and B2B brand equity.	Article 2, 3
Geographical Expansion	Explore EBBE and B2B brand equity dynamics across a more diverse array of locations and cultural settings to enhance generalizability and applicability.	Article 3
B2B vs. B2C Dynamics	Investigate and incorporate the distinctions between EBBE in B2B and B2C environments to enrich the theoretical model and its effectiveness across market settings.	Article 3
Quantitative Financial Outcomes	Link EBBE directly to quantifiable business metrics such as revenue growth, profitability, and shareholder value among B2B firms.	Article 3

Source: Own Elaboration

5.4 Thesis Outcomes

The scholarly work presented in this thesis enriches the existing research on the dynamics between Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) and B2B branding. Comprising three critical studies detailed in Part II, this doctoral effort has produced several research outputs (Table 19). These contributions have taken the form of articles either published or currently undergoing the peer-review process in journals recognized by the Web of Science or Scopus.

Table 19 - Thesis Outcomes

Article	Journal	Web of Science Impact Factor 2022	Web of Science Quartile 2022	Scopus Quartile 2023	Scopus Citescore 2023	Status
Employee-Based Brand Equity: A Systematic Review of Literature, Framework Development, and Implications for Future Research	Journal of Management History	1.6	Q4	Q1	3.0	Published
In the heart of B2B Branding: Exploring the Link Between Brand-Specific Transformational	Management Research: The Journal of the Iberoamerica	2.8	Q2	Q3	5.1	Submitted–under peer-review process

Leadership, Employer Branding and Employee-Based Brand Equity	n Academy of Management					
From Within: How Employee-Based Brand Equity Influences B2B Brand Equity - A Multilevel Study	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	3.1	Q3	Q1	6.6	Submitted - under peer-review process

Source: Own Elaboration

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