

Consequences of Employees' Employer Brand Perceptions: Test of a Serially Mediated Path Model

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This study links employees' employer brand perceptions with their affective commitment and job tensions when sequentially mediated by their perceptions of psychological empowerment and organizational identification, respectively. Based on the literature survey a conceptual path model was formulated. 810 executives from Indian organizations provided data for the study and by applying different statistical techniques, the proposed model was tested against other competing models. According to the results, all the study hypotheses and the proposed conceptual path model were accepted. Subsequently, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings were discussed. The study concluded by noting its limitations and proposing directions for future research.

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Introduction

While elements of compensation and career progression are viewed as among the most fundamental explanations for employment, these may not be enough for employees to be attracted to and/or remain with any specific employer (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). Studies concerning the employer-employee relationships note that employees' perceptions of the various facets of their organization such as its culture, leadership, and human resource (HR) practices that constitute the employer brand, considerably contribute to their positive work-related attitudes (Eid et al., 2019). However, there have been calls for further research regarding the attitudinal consequences of employees' employer brand perceptions (EEBP) which may be strengthened through employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment (EPPE) particularly when employees observe that their employing organization gives them the ability to decide and act by themselves and provides them with a sense of self-assurance in discharging their roles and responsibilities

(Bailey et al., 2016). The purpose of this research was to examine the perceptual and attitudinal outcomes of EEBP in terms of enhancing employees' positive and attenuating their negative job attitudes when intervened by suitable mediating constructs.

Literature Survey & Hypotheses

EEBP, EPPE, & OI: Employee competence is a key asset for any organization and its retention can be achieved by fostering certain functional, economic, and/or psychological benefits provided by the employing organization as a part of its employer brand (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Consequent to their appreciation of the value propositions provided by their employer's brand, employees find their work and work-life meaningful and their contributions impactful thus alleviating EPPE (Amor et al., 2020). As such, the first study hypothesis is advanced as follows.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Employees' employer brand perceptions are favorably associated with employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment.

Furthermore, research indicates that when employees find their assigned professional roles as significant and compelling and are themselves psychologically empowered, they not only discern task significance but also identify themselves with the source of such tasks namely, their organization (Zhu et al., 2012). This is because EPPE elevates employees' sense of participation in decision-making and alignment with outcomes which in

turn, increases their attachment and belongingness to their work and the organization (Treger & Alfes, 2019). With an agreeable EPPE derived from favorable value propositions implied by EEBP, the literature suggests that EPPE may be hypothesized as a proximal and EEBP as a distal antecedent of employees' organizational identification (OI) (Hofer & Gross, 2018). Accordingly, the next study hypothesis is postulated as follows.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). Higher levels of employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment are linked with higher levels of organizational identification.

OI, AC, & JT: In the context of positive attitudinal outcomes among employees, research concerning organizational processes especially, those related to HR practices, has been recurrently addressing the issue of OI (Gabbler et al., 2014). Indeed, studies indicate that affective commitment (AC) has been most often noted as a direct fallout of employees' OI (Pattnaik & Tripathi, 2020). One of the bases of such a proposition has been that employees' OI constantly encourages their pro-organizational, prosocial attitudes such as AC (Lv et al., 2020). To that extent, an employee's positive appraisal of his/her organizational membership manifested by his/her degree of OI furthers his/her need to prolong this bond through an analogous requital in the form of his/her AC (Bouraoui et al., 2019). Extant research argues that the non-fulfillment of organization-related expectations leading to organization-employee misalignment directly induces employees' detrimental

attitudes particularly, their job tensions (JT) (Zafari et al., 2019). Conversely, OI, by nurturing person-organization fit, reduces unpredictability and this leads to a diminution of employees' JT (Mandalaki et al., 2019). This leads to the postulation of the following study hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). Employees' organizational identification is positively connected with their affective commitment toward their organization.

Hypothesis 4 (H4). Employees' organizational identification has a negative connection with their job-related tensions.

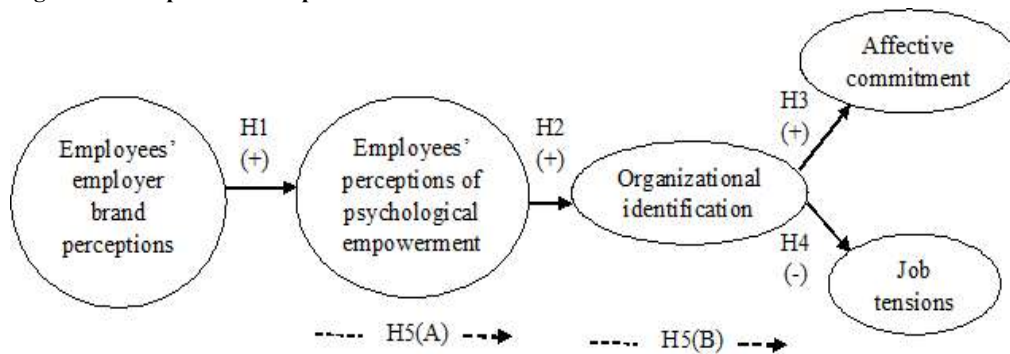
The discussion above creates two additional study hypotheses as posited below.

Hypothesis 5(A) (H5(A)). Employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment act as a significant mediator between employees' employer brand perceptions and their organizational identification.

Hypothesis 5(B) (H5(B)). Employees' organizational identification intervenes to transmit the effects of employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment to enhance their affective commitment and attenuate their job-related tensions.

Based on the deliberations above, the study constructs and the relevant hypotheses are assimilated as a conceptual path model (PM) in Fig. I.

Fig. I The Proposed Conceptual Path Model



Sample & procedure

A random survey was carried out to collect data for this study from several Indian organizations. With exact data not available for the workforce population, the sample size was approximated using the method when the population is infinite (Cohen, 1988), and accordingly, the

minimum recommended sample size was 784.

A step-by-step approach was adopted to collect data for this study. First, the yellow pages business directory of India was consulted to randomly select 45 organizations from all over the country. Then, the human resource (HR)

department of these 45 organizations was contacted. Employees of 12 organizations took part in the study survey. Eight of these organizations belonged to the manufacturing sector and the remaining four organizations were from the services sector. About 1200 study questionnaires were distributed of which 810 filled and usable forms were returned. Thus, the response rate of this survey was 67.5 percent. All respondents were full-time managerial cadre executives.

The average age of the respondents was 34.42 years and their average work experience was 10.93 years. While 518 respondents belonged to organizations in the manufacturing sector, the remaining 292 were from the services sector. Further, 486 of the respondents were males and 324 were females. Moreover, 123 of the respondents were from the senior level, 362 from the middle level, and 325 from the junior level of managerial cadres of their respective organizations.

Measures

All the study constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

EEBP was measured by adapting the 23-items employer brand scale (Tanwar & Prasad, 2017) comprising five factors of employer brand namely, healthy work atmosphere, training and development, ethics and corporate social responsibility, compensation, and work-life benefits. A sample item was 'my organization communicates clear advancement path for its

employees'. The Cronbach's alpha reliability index of this measure was .90.

EPPE was measured using the four-factor psychological empowerment scale comprising a total of 12 items and developed by Spreitzer (1995). The four factors were work-related meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. An example of the items used was 'The work I do is meaningful to me'. According to the Cronbach's alpha value, this scale had an internal consistency reliability of .92.

Employees' OI was measured with six items (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). An illustrative item was 'When someone criticizes my organization, it feels like a personal insult'. The Cronbach's liability index for this measure was .82

Employees' AC was measured using eight items of affective commitment from the organizational commitment scale developed and reported by Meyer and Allen (1997). A sample item was 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization'. Three out of the eight items were reverse-scored. The reliability index as per the Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .76.

JT of employees was measured with the seven-item inventory developed by House and Rizzo (1972). An example of the items used was 'I work under a great deal of tension'. The Cronbach's alpha reliability index was .74.

Controls. Respondents' gender (1 = male and 2 = female), the sector to

which their organization was affiliated (1 = manufacturing and 2 = services), the level of management (LoM) to which they belonged in their respective organizations (1 = senior, 2 = middle, and 3 = junior), their age (approximate years), and their work experience (approximate years) were controlled for. These variables were selected in line with similar research carried out earlier (Dahiya, 2022).

Common Method Bias

A common measurement model (CMM) associating the indicators of all the study variables was examined along with the conceptual PM to inspect differences in model fit (Siemsen et al., 2010). For the conceptual PM, the pertinent CFI (comparative-fit-index) and the IFI (incremental-fit-index) were computed as .95 and .95, respectively while they were .72 and .72 for the CMM. Thus, the CMM was not accepted, re-

moving the threat of common method bias in the proposed PM.

Evaluation of the Measurement Model

The measurement model was tested by scrutinizing its reliability and validity as the main criteria of assessment (Ramayah et al., 2011). The composite reliability values ranged from .73 to .86 thus establishing construct reliability while the average variance extracted (AVE) values varied between .55 and .66 demonstrating convergent validity. Also, the squares of the intercorrelations between the study variables were less than the AVE values which provided evidence of discriminant validity (Koufteros, 1999). Additionally, the discriminant validity was attested using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) method comprising values that spread from .29 to .49 (Henseler et al., 2016). These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Evaluation of the Measurement model

Variables	CR	1	2	3	4	5
1. EEBP	.86	.55				
2. EPPE	.79	.14(.41)	.59			
3. OI	.83	.01(.33)	.14(.48)	.66		
4. AC	.82	.08(.46)	.03(.41)	.09(.32)	.62	
5. JT	.73	.16(.49)	.05(.39)	.01(.29)	.06(.31)	.58

Note. n = 810; CR is 'Composite reliability'; The diagonal values of the matrix represent the average variance extracted while the off-diagonal values are the squares of the inter-correlations between the study variables; Off-diagonal values in parentheses are results of the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) analysis; 'EEBP' is 'Employees' employer brand perceptions', 'EPPE' is 'Employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment', 'OI' is 'Organizational identification', 'AC' is 'Affective commitment' and 'JT' is 'Job tensions'.

Configural Invariance Tests

Before carrying out further analyses, the proposed model was tested for

configural invariance for the equivalence of the indicator variables and validity of the study constructs across groups namely, sector, gender, and LoM. As per

the results, the measures used were found to be invariant between the various groups and therefore, the results ob-

tained are equally applicable to all groups considered in the present study. These results are presented in Table 2

Table 2. Configural Invariance Tests

Grouping Variable	Unconstrained Model		Fully Constrained Model		No. of Groups	Dc ²	Ddf	p-value	Invariant
	c ²	df	c ²	df					
Sector	1575.7	401	2445	1222	2	869.3	821	0.118	YES
Gender	1575.7	401	2151.3	987	2	575.6	586	0.613	YES
LoM	1575.7	401	2535.6	1456	3	959.9	1055	0.983	YES

Note. *n* = 810; LoM is 'level of management'.

Descriptive Statistics, Intercorrelations & Internal Reliability

The means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, as well as the Cronbach's alpha reliability indices of the variables are depicted in Table 3. As

expected, EEBP and EPPE ($r = .37, p d'' .01$) were significantly positive in their correlation as were EPPE and OI ($r = .38, p d'' .05$). Moreover, there was a significant positive ($r = .30, p d'' .01$) and a significant negative ($r = -.11, p d'' .01$) correlation between OI and AC and OI and JT, respectively.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics, Inter-correlations & Alpha Reliability Indices

Values (→)/ Variables (↓)	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	34.42	3.90	1.00									
2. Work experience	10.93	3.62	.28	1.00								
3. Sector	1.86	.34	.04	.08	1.00							
4. Gender	1.19	.39	.19*	.07	-.20*	1.00						
5. LoM	2.22	.58	.43*	.42*	.37	.55	1.00					
6. EEBP	4.12	.62	-.10	-.11	-.08*	.12**	-.06**	(.90)				
7. EPPE	3.36	.70	-.05	-.02**	-.06	.02*	-.02*	.37**	(.92)			
8. OI	3.64	.64	.17**	.10	.23**	-.16**	-.33**	.10*	.38*	(.82)		
9. AC	3.50	.63	.33	.44	-.50	.20**	-.10	.29**	.16**	.30**	(.76)	
10. JT	2.42	.70	.12*	.15**	-.23	-.23**	-.29*	-.40**	-.22**	-.11**	-.24**	(.74)

Note. *n* = 810; * $p d+ .05$, ** $p d+ .01$; SD, Standard Deviation. Cronbach's Alpha reliability indices are reported in parentheses on the diagonal; Short forms are as mentioned in the previous tables and text.

Path Analyses Results for the Proposed Model

The paths connecting the study variables were tested through simultaneous

regression procedures using AMOS 24.0 (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999). Here, EPPE regressed significantly and positively on EEBP (standardized $\beta = .42, p \leq .01$) as did OI on EPPE (standardized

$\beta = .65, p \leq .01$) thus supporting H1 and H2, respectively. Moreover, AC regressed significantly and positively on OI (standardized $\beta = .54, p \leq .01$) leading to the acceptance of H3. Finally, JT re-

gressed significantly and negatively on OI (standardized $\beta = -.52, p \leq .01$) resulting in the acceptance of H4. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Regression Analyses Results

Values (→)/ Paths(↓)	Unstandardized coefficients (b)	Standardized β estimates	C.R. [†]	Remarks
EEBP→EPPE	.47	.42	9.08	H1 accepted
EPPE→OI	.72	.65	14.43	H2 accepted
OI→AC	.58	.54	11.90	H3 accepted
OI→JT	-.44	-.52	-9.73	H4 accepted

Note. $n = 810$; Short forms are as mentioned in the previous table(s) and text; [†]C.R. is 'Critical Ratios', a recommended basis for testing the statistical significance of SEM components.

C.R.e ± 1.96 indicates significance at the 95% level and C.R.e ± 2.58 indicates significance at the 99% level.

Mediation Analyses Through Competing PMs

The influence of mediation in the proposed conceptual model (Fig. I) was examined by adopting a sequential mediation approach. Ergo, four competing PMs were tested and these were labeled as PM1, PM2, PM3, and PM4. PM1 comprised EEBP as the exogenous variable and AC and JT as the endogenous variables excluding EPPE and OI thus exemplifying a model with no mediation. PM2 included EPPE while PM3 incorporated OI as the only mediator between EEBP as the exogenous and AC and JT as the endogenous variables. Finally, PM4 represented the conceptual PM proposed in Fig. I earlier with EPPE as the first-order and OI as the second-order mediator between EEBP as the exogenous and AC and JT as the final endogenous variables. While inspecting the absolute and the comparative fit indices of the four PMs only those related to

PM4 were found not only to be above the recommended threshold but also had the best fit. For PM4, the absolute fit indices that are: normed χ^2 was 2.70, GFI was .97, and RMSEA was .04 while the comparative fit indices that are: CFI and IFI were both .96, NFI was .94, and RFI was .91. Apropos these results which conformed to the recommendations of Chin et al. (2003), PM4 was chosen against the other three PMs for further empirical analyses. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 5.

Additional Mediation Analyses for the Accepted PM

While the application of the structural equation modeling (SEM) procedures established EPPE and OI as significant mediators between EEBP on the one hand and AC and JT on the other and precluded problems of correlated measurement errors, it was decided to conduct the Sobel's (1982), the Aorian's

Table 5 Analysis of Competing Path Models

Values (→)Models(↓)	Fit Indices						
	Absolute Fit Indices			Comparative Fit Indices			
	Normed χ^2	GFI	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	NFI	RFI
PM1 (<i>no</i> mediation)	4.72	.83	.07	.81	.81	.76	.74
PM2 (mediation with the first-order mediator only that is, EPPE)	4.50	.84	.08	.83	.83	.79	.77
PM3 (mediation with the second-order mediator only that is, OI)	3.68	.89	.07	.87	.87	.83	.81
PM4 (mediation with all mediators)	2.70	.97	.04	.96	.96	.94	.91

Note. $n = 810$; Short forms are as mentioned in the previous table(s) and text; Minimum acceptable values of the fit indices are as mentioned in the text.

(1944), and the Goodman's (1960) tests as per the z -prime method (MacKinnon et al., 2002) to discount the possibilities of Type-I error and explore the strength of mediation. Also, the ratios of the indirect to the total effects were computed and labeled as 'percentage of mediation'. These results are presented in Table 6.

Additional mediation analyses as per the procedures suggested by MacKinnon et al. (1995) were also conducted. Two conditions of mediation were checked by these procedures viz. (i) whether the direct paths from the primary antecedent to the final consequent variables were greater than the indirect paths through the designated mediators and (ii) whether the direct paths remained significant under conditions of mediation. Since both the conditions were affirmative, both the mediators, that is, EPPE and OI in PM4 were considered *quasi*-mediators as stated in Table 6.

According to the results of this analysis, all the hypothesized mediated paths in PM4 were found significant.

A final test of mediation was performed on PM4 using the AMOS 24.0 plugin for specific indirect effects (Gaskin & Lim, 2018). According to the results of this analysis, all the hypothesized mediated paths in PM4 were found significant. As a result, H5(A) and H5(B) of this study were also accepted. These results are recorded in Table 7.

Theoretical Implications

The acceptance of the PM initially indicates an interaction between the organizational support theory (Kurtessis et al., 2017) and the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Indeed, a favorable EEBP is based largely on organizational support in terms of job allocation and consequent developmental opportunities and employees recip-

Table 6 Additional Analysis of Mediation

Values (→)/ Paths (↓)	Additional Mediation Tests			Percentage of mediation	Path Analyses		Results of the additional mediation analyses
	Sobel's test	Aorian's test	Goodman's test		Whether regression estimate of (direct paths) > (paths under mediated condition)?	Whether regression estimate of (paths under mediated condition) is significant?	
EEBP→EPPE →OId	7.87**	7.86**	7.88**	36.06	YES	YES	All variables designated as mediators fulfill the <i>quasi</i> - mediator role
EPPE→OId →AC	8.03**	8.01**	8.04**	58.19			
EPPE→OId →JT	-9.84**	-9.86**	-9.83**	49.29			

Note. $n = 810$; ** $p < .01$; Short forms are as mentioned in the previous table(s) and text.

Table 7 Specific Indirect Effects

Indirect Path	Unstandardized Estimate	p-Value	Standardized Estimate
EEBP → EPPE → OId	0.68	0.01	0.84**
EEBP → EPPE → OId → AC	0.55	0.00	0.82***
EEBP → EPPE → OId → JT	-0.22	0.05	-0.17*
EPPE → OId → AC	0.76	0.01	0.78**
EPPE → OId → JT	-0.21	0.05	-0.19*

Note. $n = 810$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; Short forms are as mentioned in the previous table(s) and text.

rocate the same through felt obligations in terms of self-confidence, self-determination, and autonomous decision making signifying EPPE. Furthermore, the results point to the collusion between the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the resource theory (Foa & Foa, 2012). When employees progressively learn that through task significance and enhanced competence their organizational membership is adding value to their professional self, EPPE results in the evaluation of their organization as a resource that conveys self-regard and self-esteem which in turn, builds and forges their identity with that of their organization.

The results also have implications from the point of view of the self-categorization theory (SCT) (Haslam, 2001). According to the SCT, employees identify with their organization as a part of their referent group which enhances and justifies their activities as beneficial to their organization, and this fulfills the reciprocity norms through attitudes such as their AC. Also, by categorizing themselves as in-group members of an organization, employees displaying higher levels of OI suffer fewer instances of unpredictability which reduces their JT.

Practical implications

The results of this study imply that through the provision of systematic and pertinent developmental opportunities, flexible work practices, allowance for optimum resource utilization, and encouragement towards self-determination *vis-a-vis* work-related decisions, managers can not only enhance EEBP but also extend it to enhanced levels of EPPE. They also indicate that when employees construe a self-determined authority over their allocated tasks as encapsulated by EPPE, it creates in them a sense of identity and belongingness to their organization. By acknowledging such construals through rewards and benefits mechanisms, managers can clarify the linkages between employees' performance and the achievement of organizational objectives.

Acknowledging such construals through rewards and benefits mechanisms, managers can clarify the linkages between employees' performance and the achievement of organizational objectives.

Finally, the empirical affirmation of the conceptual PM substantiates that there are intervening variables that managers should cognize to sustain the strength of the sequential connections between EEBP and its consequences. The maintenance of a healthy work climate, skill-based task apportionment, maintenance of employees' work-life balance, and celebrating individual achievements as organizational success

are some such steps that managers may ensure to establish EPPE and OI as significant mediators as envisaged by the results and further validated by the acceptance of PM4.

Limitations & Future Research Scope

The results, findings, and implications of this study should be considered within the following limitations:

First, this study was carried out among managerial-level executives of Indian origin and working in Indian organizations. Thereby, it not only omits the viewpoints of non-managerial staff but also precludes cross-national and/or cross-cultural comparisons of the hypothesized links between the study constructs as depicted by the PM4. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of the study precluded scrutiny of temporal variations of the study variables.

The limitations of this study as outlined above provide some directions for future research. Specifically, the empirically validated PM4 of this study can be examined cross-nationally and through a longitudinal research design to capture a broader socio-cultural and diverse business context. Future studies should include a greater representation of employees who not only belong to the non-managerial cadre but are also employed contractually or part-time. In other words, future research may incorporate a wider sample set that includes all appropriate organizational stakeholders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributed by connecting EEBP with employees' AC and their JT through their EPPE and OI as significant intervening variables, in all likelihood, for the first time in the context of managerial executives working in Indian organizations. It addressed the existing calls for research by proposing a conceptual PM that was empirically investigated through a comparison with competing PMs. Consequently, all the study hypotheses and the PM4 that established *quasi*-mediation by EPPE and OI as the first- and second-order mediators respectively, were accepted. The findings and their theoretical and practical implications were then noted. The study concluded by recording its limitations and future research scopes arising therefrom.

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