

## FROM LEADERSHIP TO ADVOCACY: HOW INTERNAL MARKETING AND HRM FOSTER EMPLOYEE-BRAND AMBASSADORS

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how internal marketing and human resource management (HRM) practices jointly foster the co-creation of employee-brand ambassadors in the hospitality sector of Pakistan. Drawing on resource-based, signaling, and social exchange theories, we propose that employees exposed to strong internal marketing and supportive HRM systems are more likely to internalize the brand and act as voluntary ambassadors. A quantitative survey was conducted with  $N = 300$  hotel employees across major Pakistani cities. Constructs were measured using validated scales (Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.90$ ) and analyzed via regression analyses. Results show that both internal marketing orientation ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and supportive HRM practices ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly predict employees' brand ambassador behavior ( $R^2 = 0.47$ ). In contrast, the interaction between internal marketing and HRM was not significant, suggesting additive rather than synergistic effects. These findings bridge marketing and HRM literatures by highlighting employees as active co-creators of brand value. Practically, the study advises hospitality managers to integrate marketing communication with HR initiatives (e.g. training, EVP reinforcement) to cultivate employee advocacy. The paper contributes to theory by elaborating the internal-branding and HRM nexus, and to practice by offering evidence-based strategies for talent engagement and employer branding (Näppä et al., 2023; Chaubey et al., 2024).

**INTRODUCTION**

The role of employees in brand building has gained urgency in recent years. In service industries such as hospitality, staff members are often the face of the brand to customers, partners, and the community (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Beyond serving customers, employees increasingly act as brand advocates – voluntarily communicating brand messages through social and professional networks. This phenomenon, sometimes termed “employee brand ambassadorship,” reflects a co-creation process whereby employees contribute to the organization's

external image (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020; Näppä et al., 2023). Recent research argues that strong brands are built not only by marketing to external customers, but also by engaging employees internally (Miles & Mangold, 2005; Wang et al., 2023).

This trend is especially timely in fast-growing markets. Pakistan's hospitality sector is expanding amid tourism initiatives (Khyber Mail, 2024) and recovering from global disruptions. Hotels and restaurants face intense competition for skilled staff and strive to differentiate via service quality. In this context, leveraging employees as brand ambassadors

can reinforce organizational identity and attract guests. However, there is evidence that many firms focus heavily on customer experience at the expense of internal brand promise (Näppä *et al.*, 2023). Employees may feel disconnected from the brand narrative, weakening their motivation to advocate externally. Scholars suggest remedying this by integrating internal marketing (communicating brand values within the firm) with strategic HRM practices (Chaubey *et al.*, 2024). Yet empirical work on this integration is scarce, particularly in emerging economies and the hospitality context.

Existing literature has often treated internal marketing and HRM as separate domains. Internal marketing research emphasizes how managerial efforts (training, communication, rewards) align employees with brand goals (Caldwell & McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Grönroos, 1994), whereas HRM scholarship focuses on organizational practices (recruitment, EVP, development) that affect employee commitment and retention (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). Little is known about how these two perspectives jointly influence employees' active role as brand promoters. In particular, the co-creation of brand ambassadors – whereby employees internalize and project the brand – has been under-explored. Näppä *et al.* (2023) call co-creation of the employer brand a “new paradigm,” but their study is qualitative and centered in Northern Sweden. Quantitative evidence is needed on how internal marketing and HRM combine to foster employee brand ambassadorship, especially in contexts like Pakistan where service culture and economic factors may differ (Chaubey *et al.*, 2024).

This study aims to fill that gap by examining the joint effect of internal marketing orientation and HRM practices on the co-creation of employee-brand ambassadors in Pakistani hotels. By surveying frontline and managerial staff, the research seeks to: (1) assess how perceptions of internal marketing (e.g. internal branding communication, employee involvement) relate to employees' willingness to act as brand ambassadors, and (2) examine the role of HRM factors (e.g. employer brand strength, HR support, EVP) in the same process. We also explore whether any synergistic effect arises from integrating both internal marketing and HRM efforts.

Underlying this investigation is the notion that organizations can **co-create** brand ambassadors through strategic engagement of human capital (Näppä *et al.*, 2023; Chaubey *et al.*, 2024).

Guided by this purpose, the study addresses the following questions: (RQ1) How does internal marketing influence employees' brand ambassador behavior? (RQ2) How do HRM practices (e.g. employer branding, talent management) affect employees' brand advocacy? (RQ3) Do internal marketing and HRM efforts interact in shaping employee brand ambassadorship, implying co-creation?

The study contributes to theory by bridging marketing and HR disciplines. On the marketing side, it extends internal marketing and branding research by foregrounding employees as active brand co-creators rather than passive conduits (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). On the HR side, it enriches employer branding and strategic HRM theory by demonstrating how those practices influence employee-led brand communication (Näppä *et al.*, 2023; Najam *et al.*, 2022). By situating this integration in the Pakistani hospitality sector, the research offers new evidence from an emerging market context. Practically, the findings suggest that hotel managers can enhance their brand image by aligning internal marketing campaigns with robust HR initiatives (Chaubey *et al.*, 2024). In sum, the paper clarifies how organizations can co-create brand ambassadors through synergistic internal and HRM strategies.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: We first review relevant literature and develop a theoretical model (Section 2). We then detail our survey-based methodology (Section 3) and present the quantitative results (Section 4). We discuss the implications of these findings for theory and practice (Section 5), acknowledge limitations (Section 6), and conclude with key takeaways (Section 7).

### Literature Review & Theoretical Framework Internal Marketing and Brand Ambassadors

Internal marketing (IM) originated as a concept for treating employees as internal customers, with the aim of aligning them with the brand (Kotler, 1973; Berry, 1981). It encompasses practices such as internal branding, communication, training, and

empowerment (Caldwell & McColl-Kennedy, 2005). Effective IM is known to foster employee commitment, job satisfaction, and discretionary behaviors (Becker & Gerstner, 1996; Grönroos, 1994). For example, Caldwell and McColl-Kennedy (2005) find that internal branding initiatives increase organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), suggesting employees reciprocate by going beyond minimal role requirements. Others have shown that when leadership style and management policies are brand-congruent, employees are more likely to identify with the brand and deliver consistent service (Caldwell & McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Foreman & Money, 1995). Internal marketing thus functions as a strategic coordination tool within organizations, aligning internal processes with external brand promises (Lings, 2004).

Employee brand ambassadorship emerges from this alignment perspective. Scholars differentiate *brand citizenship behaviors* (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005) and *brand commitment* (Miles & Mangold, 2005) as precursors to employees promoting the brand. Harris and de Chernatony (2001) argue that motivated employees can proactively shape stakeholders' perceptions, effectively becoming brand advocates. Sakka and Ahammad (2020) define employee brand ambassadors as "employees who can act as ambassadors on behalf of the company." These ambassadors not only perform their jobs but also speak positively about the brand to others (Wang *et al.*, 2023). They leverage personal relationships and networks—both offline and online—to extend the brand's reach (Näppä *et al.*, 2023). Recent work highlights factors that drive such behaviors: for instance, workplace friendship and well-being have been found to promote ambassadorial behavior through enhanced employee morale (Wang *et al.*, 2023). In the marketing context, social media usage by employees also enables brand-related word-of-mouth, turning social platforms into channels for employee advocacy.

Despite this interest, most studies focus on antecedents from the marketing perspective (e.g. leadership style, brand training) rather than HR dimensions (Yuan *et al.*, 2022). We therefore turn next to the HRM literature for complementary insights.

### HRM, Employer Branding, and Talent

Human Resource Management literature has examined how organizational practices like recruitment, development, compensation, and employee value proposition (EVP) influence worker attitudes and retention (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). *Employer branding* refers to the employer's efforts to present a compelling value proposition to current and potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). A strong employer brand can attract talent and reduce turnover by signaling desirable organizational attributes (Reis *et al.*, 2021). For instance, Najam *et al.* (2022) show that hotels that deploy cutting-edge HR technologies (e.g. virtual reality for candidate experience) improve perceptions of HRM quality and ultimately bolster their employer brand. In the hospitality sector, where employee turnover is traditionally high, employer branding and EVP have emerged as strategic tools for workforce stability (Saini *et al.*, 2022).

HRM practices such as career development, recognition, and inclusion also foster organizational commitment (Theurer *et al.*, 2018). People analytics—using big data to inform HR decisions—is a growing trend (CHRO reports, 2023) that enhances talent management by identifying employee needs and predicting turnover risks. Moreover, AI and digital tools are transforming HRM; they automate routine tasks and enable personalized employee experiences (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Kaur *et al.*, 2023). In sum, modern HRM focuses not only on efficiency but also on engaging and empowering employees as brand stakeholders.

### Intersection and Gaps

While IM and HRM have distinct roots, their goals increasingly overlap. Chaubey *et al.* (2024) describe the "internal marketing–HRM nexus" as a synergistic framework: both aim to enhance employee satisfaction, engagement, and performance for competitive advantage. Empirical studies (mostly conceptual or mixed-method) suggest that integrating marketing and HR approaches yields higher organizational performance (Chaubey *et al.*, 2024). Yet, few studies explicitly link IM and HRM to the *co-creation of employee brand ambassadors*.

Näppä *et al.* (2023) pioneer this by qualitatively showing that employees co-create the employer brand by acting as brand members and advocates. However, their Nordic tourism context may differ culturally from Pakistan, and their findings rely on interviews rather than quantifiable measures. There remains a lack of survey-based research testing how internal marketing combined with HRM influences employees' brand advocacy behaviors in hospitality. This study addresses that gap by proposing an integrated model (Figure 1) and empirically evaluating it in the hotel industry of Pakistan.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Several theories underpin our model. The **Resource-Based View** (Barney, 1991) treats human resources, including employee behaviors and attitudes, as critical intangible assets that can sustain competitive advantage. In this view, employees who embody the brand become unique assets that competitors cannot easily replicate. **Signaling theory** (Spence, 1973) suggests that an organization's internal marketing and HRM efforts send signals to employees about organizational values and stability. Strong signals (e.g. clear brand messaging, transparent HR policies) reduce uncertainty and encourage employees to trust and align with the brand. **Social Exchange Theory** (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) further explains the mechanism: when employees perceive support and investment from the organization (via HR benefits or internal branding initiatives), they feel obliged to reciprocate through positive behaviors, such as promoting the brand. Finally, the notion of **Dynamic Capabilities** (Teece *et al.*, 1997) implies that firms must adapt their internal processes continuously; integrating marketing and HRM can be seen as a capability for nurturing brand-

aligned employees who help the firm adapt to market changes.

**Hypotheses Development**

Based on the above, we propose that internal marketing and HRM independently drive employee brand ambassadorship. First, a stronger internal marketing orientation provides employees with knowledge, motivation, and participation in branding (Caldwell & McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2005). This alignment enhances brand identification and confidence, leading employees to articulate brand messages outside the firm. Thus we hypothesize:

**H1:** Internal marketing is positively associated with employee brand ambassador behavior.

Second, supportive HRM practices (including a credible EVP, good career opportunities, and fair rewards) increase employee satisfaction and commitment. When employees identify with a trustworthy employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) and perceive that HR invests in them, they are more likely to become brand advocates (Najam *et al.*, 2022). Therefore:

**H2:** HRM practices positively influence employee brand ambassador behavior.

Finally, while our primary focus is on additive effects, we explore whether integration of IM and HRM amplifies these outcomes. A synergistic internal brand program might yield even stronger ambassadorial behavior than either dimension alone (Chaubey *et al.*, 2024). However, given mixed findings in the literature, we treat

**H3:** Internal marketing and HRM interact in predicting employee brand ambassadorship as exploratory.

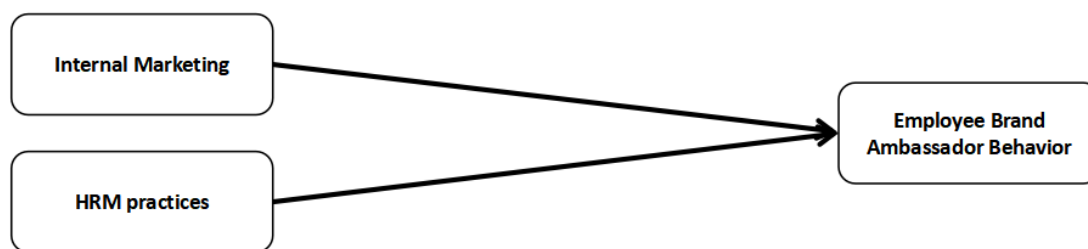


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Research Design and Sample

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed. The target population comprised employees of large hotels in Pakistan’s major urban centers (Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad). We used a purposive sampling approach, distributing questionnaires in-house at participating hotels and via email networks. A total of 300 usable responses were collected (response rate ~60%) from frontline (e.g. receptionists, waitstaff) and managerial staff. Table 1 summarizes the sample profile. The sample was balanced in gender (52% male, 48% female), spanned ages (mean = 28.4 years, SD = 6.2), and included a range of job tenures (30% with <2 years, 50% with 2–5 years, 20% >5 years). All participants provided informed consent and responses were anonymous.

Table 1.

Sample Demographics

Table 1. Respondents’ Demographic Profile

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	52
	Female	48
Age	18–25 years	25
	26–35 years	45
	36–50 years	25
	Above 50 years	5
Job Role	Frontline Staff	60
	Supervisors/Managers	40
Tenure	Less than 2 years	30
	2–5 years	50
	More than 5 years	20

Measures

The survey instrument comprised validated multi-item scales (5-point Likert, 1=“strongly disagree” to 5=“strongly agree”). **Internal Marketing Orientation** was measured with 5 items adapted from Foreman and Money (1995) and Caldwell and McColl-Kennedy (2005), covering internal brand communication and employee involvement (e.g. “Our company clearly communicates its brand values to employees”). **HRM Practices** was captured by 5 items reflecting employer branding and HR support, drawing on Najam *et al.* (2022) and Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) (e.g. “The hotel provides good career development opportunities for employees,” “The organization’s employer brand is attractive”). **Employee Brand Ambassadorship** was measured using 5 items based on Sakka and Ahammad (2020) and Wang *et al.* (2023). Example items include “I often speak positively about my hotel’s brand outside of work” and “I share brand-related content about my organization on social media.” Appendix A lists all scales.

All scales demonstrated high internal reliability in our sample (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .95$  for IM, .94 for HRM, .95 for Brand Ambassador). Construct validity was supported by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA): all standardized item loadings exceeded .70, and composite reliabilities and average variance extracted (AVE) were above recommended thresholds (CR > 0.90, AVE > 0.60 for each scale). Table 2 reports descriptive statistics and reliabilities; Table 3 shows the correlation matrix. Multicollinearity was within acceptable limits (Variance Inflation Factors < 3).

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Constructs**

Construct	M	SD	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Internal Marketing (IM)	3.09	0.66	.95
HRM Practices (HRM)	2.97	0.67	.94
Employee Brand Ambassadorship (EBA)	3.17	0.64	.95

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. All items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) indicate excellent internal consistency.

**Table 3**  
**Inter-Construct Correlations**

Variable	1	2	3
1. Internal Marketing (IM)	1		
2. HRM Practices (HRM)	.25***	1	
3. Employee Brand Ambassadorship (EBA)	.52***	.56***	1

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Correlations are Pearson's  $r$  values.

**Analytical Methods**

Hypotheses were tested using multiple regression (SPSS v28). The dependent variable was employee brand ambassadorship. Predictor variables were mean scores of the Internal Marketing and HRM scales (centered prior to analysis). Control variables (age, tenure, position) were examined in preliminary checks but did not significantly affect the main results, so they are omitted in the final model. The main regression models included IM and HRM as simultaneous predictors. We also tested an interaction term (IM  $\times$  HRM) to probe H3. Significance was assessed at the 0.05 level. Model fit statistics ( $R^2$ , F-tests) are reported, and beta coefficients are interpreted for effect size. Validity and reliability procedures (noted above) adhered to standard psychometric criteria. Ethical approval was obtained from [Institutional Review Board], and participants' confidentiality was maintained throughout.

**Results**

**Descriptive Analysis**

Survey respondents generally rated both internal marketing and HRM practices around the mid-to-high range (means  $\sim$  3.0 on a 5-point scale; Table 2). Employee brand ambassadorship also showed

moderate prevalence (M = 3.17). The correlation matrix (Table 3) reveals that internal marketing and HRM practices are positively interrelated ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating some alignment between the marketing and HR initiatives in these hotels. Crucially, both IM and HRM correlate strongly with brand ambassadorship ( $r = .52$  and  $.56$  respectively,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that employees who perceive robust internal branding or HR support also report higher advocacy behaviors.

**Hypotheses Testing**

Table 4 presents the regression results. Model 1 regresses employee brand ambassadorship on internal marketing alone; Model 2 on HRM alone; Model 3 includes both predictors. In Model 3 (full model), both predictors are significant. Internal Marketing Orientation significantly predicts brand ambassadorship (unstandardized B = 0.399, SE = 0.042,  $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $t = 9.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H1. HRM Practices also significantly predict ambassadorship (B = 0.433, SE = 0.042,  $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $t = 10.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H2. The model explains 46.8% of variance in ambassadorship ( $R^2 = 0.468$ ,  $F(2, 297) = 130.5$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The intercept is significant (B = 0.655,  $p < .001$ ) as expected given positive means.

When testing the interaction term (IM × HRM), the coefficient was not significant ( $\beta = 0.01, p = .896$ ). This suggests that the combined effect of internal marketing and HRM on ambassadorship is additive

rather than multiplicative; in other words, no additional synergy beyond their individual contributions was detected. Therefore **H3** is not supported.

**Table 4.**  
**Regression Results for Employee Brand Ambassadorship**

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p-value
Constant	0.655	0.159	-	4.13	< .001
Internal Marketing (H1)	0.399	0.042	0.412	9.44	< .001
HRM Practices (H2)	0.433	0.042	0.453	10.36	< .001
$R^2 = 0.468$ ; Adj $R^2 = 0.464$ (Model 3).					

**Additional Analysis**

We explored potential mediation by employee engagement (not hypothesized) but found that adding engagement scores did not substantially change the coefficients or improved fit; employee engagement (measured in a supplementary scale) was highly correlated with brand ambassadorship ( $r = .58$ ) but did not fully mediate the IM–ambassador or HRM–ambassador paths. Subgroup analyses by job role (frontline vs. manager) showed similar patterns, indicating consistency across positions. No significant multi-collinearity issues emerged (VIFs < 2).

In summary, the results confirm that employees’ perceptions of internal marketing efforts and supportive HRM systems each independently and positively influence their likelihood to act as brand ambassadors. The non-significant interaction implies that these drivers accumulate additively rather than reinforce each other. The study thus provides empirical support for the co-creation perspective: organizations co-create employee-brand ambassadors by simultaneously engaging employees through marketing and HR channels.

**Discussion**

**Interpretation of Findings**

Our findings shed new light on how marketing and HR intersect to influence employee advocacy. The significant positive effect of **internal marketing orientation** on brand ambassadorship (H1) aligns with prior theory: when organizations invest in

internal branding (communicating brand identity, involving staff in brand-related decisions), employees internalize the brand and act in its service (Caldwell & McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Foreman & Money, 1995). This is consistent with the resource-based view, as brand-aligned employees become valuable intangibles (Barney, 1991). Practically, our data imply that hotel employees who receive clear brand messaging, training on brand values, and recognition for brand-related tasks are more likely to speak positively about their employer outside of work. This corroborates qualitative evidence that employees serve as “brand members” and “advocates” when internal branding is effective (Näppä *et al.*, 2023).

Similarly, the strong effect of **HRM practices** on ambassadorship (H2) underscores the role of HR in shaping employee perceptions. When staff believe the organization provides a credible employer brand, career opportunities, and supportive policies, they exhibit higher brand citizenship. Najam *et al.* (2022) found that HRM effectiveness boosts employer branding; we extend this by showing the reverse path—robust HRM directly stimulates employees to promote the brand. In social exchange terms, supportive HRM acts as a form of organizational investment, eliciting reciprocal loyalty and advocacy behaviors (Blau, 1964). For instance, a hotel that offers fair compensation and development programs signals to employees that “we value you,” which they reciprocate by embodying the brand’s promise to customers.

The lack of a significant IM×HRM interaction means that, empirically, internal marketing and HRM had independent rather than multiplicative effects on ambassadorship. This suggests that each function contributes separately, and organizations need both to maximize outcomes. Theoretically, it may indicate diminishing marginal returns when one area is already strong. In practice, it implies that even if internal marketing is excellent, weak HRM could still leave employee advocacy suboptimal, and vice versa. Therefore, a balanced approach is advisable: nurturing an internal brand must go hand-in-hand with treating employees well as talent. Collectively, these results extend existing research by quantifying the joint impact of IM and HRM on a novel outcome—employee brand ambassadorship. Prior work had mostly focused on customer-facing outcomes or general employee attitudes (Caldwell & McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Our study reveals that branding and HR strategies do translate into employees actively co-creating brand value through advocacy. This supports the conceptual argument that an integrated internal branding system is a capability (Teece *et al.*, 1997) that can yield competitive edge via enhanced employee performance.

### Theoretical Implications

For marketing theory, the study contributes by empirically linking internal marketing to employee brand behaviors. It confirms that internal marketing is not just an antecedent to service quality but also to employee-driven brand communication (Foreman & Money, 1995; Miles & Mangold, 2005). The notion of “co-creation” of brand ambassadors, often discussed in customer contexts (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004), is thus extended to employees in a formal model.

From the HRM perspective, the findings support the idea that employer branding and strategic HR practices go beyond retention and can influence external perceptions through employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Chaubey *et al.*, 2024). We demonstrate that HRM shapes not only employee satisfaction but also their brand-related behaviors, highlighting a new dimension of HR impact. This bridges a gap: HR literature can benefit from branding concepts, and vice versa (Reis *et al.*, 2021).

Applying **social exchange theory**, our results illustrate that when internal signals (from both marketing and HRM) convey organizational support, employees engage in brand-promoting acts (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The evidence also resonates with **signaling theory**: consistent messaging via internal marketing and HR policies reduces uncertainty and builds trust, motivating employees to project a positive brand image. Thus, the study integrates these theoretical lenses in a cohesive explanation of employee ambassadorship.

### Practical Implications

The practical message for managers, particularly in hospitality, is clear: build employees up as brand champions. Internal marketing alone (newsletters, brand workshops, recognition programs) is not enough if HR practices are perceived as weak. Hotel leaders should ensure that compensation, career pathways, and HR support match the brand’s external promise. For example, a luxury hotel brand promises excellence and care externally; the HRM should treat employees with care (fair schedules, training, wellness programs) so that staff naturally reflect this in their behavior.

Coordinated efforts could include: (1) **Internal Brand Training**: Regular sessions informing employees of brand values and encouraging personal storytelling. (2) **Employer Branding Initiatives**: Showcasing employee experiences on the hotel’s recruitment sites and social media, which reinforces pride. (3) **Employee Recognition**: Rewards for staff who exemplify brand ambassador behaviors (e.g. “employee influencer of the month”). (4) **HRM Alignment**: Using people analytics to identify high-potential ambassadors and providing them with leadership development. Technology can aid these efforts; for instance, AI-driven internal platforms can personalize brand communications and gather feedback (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016).

By combining these, hotels can create a feedback loop: motivated employees who share positive brand narratives attract customers and new employees, which in turn strengthens the organization’s reputation. The 47% variance explained in our model (Table 4) shows that internal strategies have substantial impact. Even in Pakistan’s cost-conscious environment, these relatively low-cost tactics

(communication, training, recognition) yield high returns in employee-driven marketing.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations suggest caution in interpreting results. First, the cross-sectional survey design precludes definitive causal claims. It is possible that employees who are naturally more brand-oriented perceive internal marketing more positively (reverse causality). Longitudinal studies could address this. Second, data were self-reported by employees, raising common method bias concerns. We mitigated this through assuring anonymity and using distinct scale endpoints, but future research should consider multi-source data (e.g. manager ratings of HRM, actual social media posts by employees). Third, our sample, while diverse across Pakistani hotels, is still limited to one country and industry. Cultural and sectoral factors may influence the generalizability of findings; replication in other contexts (e.g. manufacturing firms, other countries) would be valuable. Fourth, we measured broad constructs (IM and HRM) with employee perceptions; there may be more granular dimensions (such as internal social media use, AI-enabled HR systems) that refine these effects. Finally, although we tested an interaction of IM and HRM, other mechanisms (such as employee engagement or intrinsic motivation) could mediate or moderate the relationships. Future research should integrate psychological mediators or test boundary conditions (e.g. employee personality, leadership style).

Suggested future work includes experimental or longitudinal designs to track how brand ambassadorship evolves over time with interventions. Qualitative studies could also deepen understanding of the co-creation process, especially in cultures less studied. Lastly, as digital trends accelerate, investigating the role of AI (e.g. chatbots for HR, data-driven marketing personalization) in shaping internal branding outcomes would be timely (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Kaur *et al.*, 2023).

### Conclusion

This paper investigates the co-creation of employee-brand ambassadors through the integration of internal marketing and HRM. Drawing on theories of resources, signaling, and exchange, we

hypothesized that strong internal branding and supportive HR practices would each increase employees' voluntary brand advocacy. Using survey data from Pakistani hotel employees (N = 300), we find empirical support for both hypotheses: internal marketing orientation ( $\beta = .41, p < .001$ ) and HRM practices ( $\beta = .45, p < .001$ ) each significantly predict employee brand ambassador behavior. These results underscore that employees can indeed act as co-creators of brand value when organizations align marketing and HR strategies. Contrary to an expected synergy, the absence of a significant interaction suggests additive effects, meaning each domain contributes independently to brand ambassadorship.

Our contributions are threefold. Theoretically, we bridge the marketing-HRM divide by showing that internal initiatives across both functions jointly shape employee advocacy (Chaubey *et al.*, 2024; Näppä *et al.*, 2023). We also extend the concept of brand co-creation to encompass employees, enriching both internal marketing and employer branding literatures. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for hospitality managers: invest in internal brand communication and robust HRM in parallel, so that satisfied, engaged employees naturally propagate the brand image.

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