
Employee Advocacy, Personal Branding, and Employer Attractiveness in the Digital Era: An integrative conceptual Framework.

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Abstract

In the digital era, organizations are increasingly relying on employee-generated communication to shape their employer brand image. This study proposes an integrative conceptual framework that examines the relationships between personal branding, employee advocacy, and employer brand attractiveness, while accounting for the moderating role of social media use. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, identity expressiveness theory and Social Exchange Theory, it argues that employees who actively develop their personal brand enhance their visibility, credibility, and professional image, which motivates them to engage in promotional behaviors that benefit their organization. These promotional behaviors, in turn, influence the organization's external image and strengthen the appeal of the employer brand, defined as the perceived benefits of working for a given organization. Furthermore, this theoretical framework suggests that the use of social media strengthens these ties by providing a platform through which employees can express both their personal identity and organizational identity, and reach a wider audience. Methodologically, this study adopts a theory-based integrative literature review relying on a structured analysis of prior research in the fields of organizational behavior, communication, and employer branding. By integrating previously fragmented lines of research, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of employee advocacy as a key mediating mechanism and the use of social media as a contextual moderator in the relationship between personal branding and employer brand attractiveness. The study concludes that personal branding positively influences employee advocacy, which in turn strengthens employer brand attractiveness, while social media use amplifies these relationships in digital environments. From a managerial perspective, it emphasizes the importance of empowering employees to act as agents of strategic communication in order to enhance the organization's appeal in competitive labor markets.

Keywords : Personal branding, Employee advocacy, Employer brand attractiveness, Social media use.

Introduction

In today's digital era, many organizations have transformed the way they build and manage their relationships with surrounding stakeholders due to the rapid evolution of digital communication (Strauss et al, 2024). Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and other social media platforms have significantly disrupted traditional communication processes, they have shifted the control of brand communications strategy from companies to their network, including their employees. In this context, employees do no longer merely receive corporate communications; instead they actively contribute to the company's reputation (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

As a result of this reconfiguration, employee advocacy has emerged as a strategic organizational resource. "Employee advocacy" refers to the voluntary actions taken by employees to promote and support their organization among an external audience (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014). This happens when employees spontaneously share work-related content and speak positively about their employer on their personal social media accounts, this powerful influential role enhances the organizational reputation and brand authenticity of these messages, since they are considered as more credible and trustworthy sources than organizational communication (Thomas 2020, Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Edelman, 2020).

Alongside this, the growing importance of personal visibility in digital settings has encouraged the development of personal branding. Personal branding describes the way individuals strategically build and share their professional identity to shape how others see them (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque et al., 2011). Due to social media, which has intensified this trend by allowing everyone to select and share content that reflects both their personal and professional identities.

Recent theoretical frameworks, mainly Identity Expressiveness Theory with Van Zoonen et al (2014), indicate that employees employ social media platforms not only to share general or personal information but also to express and showcase both their personal and organizational identities. This dual expression of identity leads to a conceptual intersection between personal branding and employee advocacy, given that employees often communicate both to promote themselves and to promote their organization.

Despite the growing body of research on these constructs, existing research have primarily scrutinized employee advocacy and personal branding separately. This fragmentation constrains our understanding of how these behaviors interact and jointly influence

organizational outcomes. In particular, there is a lack of integrative frameworks explaining their combined impact on employer brand attractiveness, defined as the perceived benefits associated with working for an organization (Berthon et al., 2005).

Employer brand attractiveness has become a central issue for companies operating in increasingly competitive labor markets. A strong employer brand enables organizations to attract and retain talent, reduce recruitment costs, and enhance overall performance (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Wilden et al., 2010). In digital contexts, employer brand perceptions are increasingly shaped by online content, particularly employee-generated communication, which is perceived as more authentic and credible than traditional corporate messaging (Dabirian et al., 2017).

In light of these developments, a significant gap has emerged in the research:

How do employee advocacy and personal branding interact to influence employer brand attractiveness in the digital era?

It is particularly important to address this issue from both a theoretical and a managerial perspective. In theory, this makes it possible to integrate the various areas of research related to internal communication, identity building, and employer branding. From a managerial perspective, this study highlights how organizations can leverage employee-driven communication to enhance their appeal as employers.

The objective of this study is therefore to propose an integrative conceptual model that establishes a link between personal branding and employee advocacy, on the one hand, and employer brand attractiveness, on the other. This model draws on well-established theoretical frameworks, including Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), and identity expressiveness theory (Van Zoonen et al., 2014a), to explain the mechanisms underlying these relationships.

In doing so, this study aims to contribute to the literature by:

- bridging the gap between research on personal branding and research on employee advocacy,
- extending existing theoretical frameworks to the context of employer branding,
- and proposing a structured and testable model for future empirical studies.

1. Research Methodology

This study adopts a deductive reasoning approach grounded in established theoretical frameworks, including Social Identity Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Identity Expressiveness Theory. Given the conceptual nature of the research, the article relies on a theory-based integrative literature review methodology to synthesize and connect fragmented streams of research related to personal branding, employee advocacy, and employer brand attractiveness. This methodological approach is consistent with conceptual and theory-building research in management and organizational studies.

The choice of this methodology is particularly justified by the interdisciplinary nature of this topic, which spans human resource management, organizational behavior, and communication and marketing sciences. Existing research highlights that employee advocacy is a discretionary behavior closely related to organizational citizenship behavior and employee communication behavior (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2000; Kim & Rhee, 2011). However, these contributions remain dispersed across different theoretical traditions, creating a need for integrative conceptual work.

The literature review is conducted using a structured, keyword-based research process. These keywords include: *employee advocacy*, *employee communication behavior*, *employee word-of-mouth*, *brand ambassadorship*, *personal branding*, *employer branding*, *employer brand attractiveness*, *organizational identification*, *social identity*, *social exchange*, and *identity expression*.

The search is conducted in major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, JSTOR, and APA PsycNet, thereby ensuring access to high-quality, peer-reviewed publications. This integrative conceptual review follows the guidelines established for literature-based theoretical research in the field of management (Tranfield et al., 2003) and builds on previous methodological practices in conceptual organizational studies.

The selection of relevant studies is based on three main criteria. Firstly, conceptual relevance: only studies addressing at least one of the fundamental concepts – employee advocacy, personal branding or employer brand attractiveness – are included. The basic definitions of employee advocacy, namely voluntary communication behaviour initiated by employees and directed at an external audience (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014), serve as a reference. Second, the theoretical foundation: priority is given to studies based on well-established theoretical

frameworks. This article draws in particular on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains how individuals' identification with social groups shapes their behavior, and on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which accounts for reciprocal behaviors based on the perception of organizational support. Furthermore, the theory of identity expressivity (Van Zoonen et al., 2014) is used to explain how employees express both their personal identity and their organizational identity through their communication behaviors, particularly in digital environments. Third, scientific quality and relevance: the focus is on articles published in peer-reviewed journals and on significant contributions in the fields of organizational behavior, communication, and employer branding. Particular attention is given to recent studies on employee advocacy in the context of social media and digital communication (Dabirian et al., 2017; Van Zoonen & Treem, 2019).

This methodology makes two key contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it synthesizes fragmented lines of research by combining identity-based, relational, and communication-based perspectives within a unified framework. This responds to calls for a more integrative theoretical approach to employees' behaviors regarding corporate promotion and communication (Van Zoonen & Treem, 2019).

From a management perspective, this provides a clearer, structured understanding of how employees' communication behaviors manifest themselves and influence the attractiveness of the employer brand, particularly in digital environments where employee-generated content is perceived as more credible than corporate communications (Dabirian et al., 2017).

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Employee Advocacy

Employee advocacy has been the subject of numerous studies, which describe it as voluntary behavior on the part of employees that contributes to the organization's communication and reputation. Employees voluntarily promote or defend their organization's brands, products, or services, generally beyond the formal requirements of their job (Walden & Westerman, 2018). This refers to situations in which employees tend to promote, advocate for, or support their organization to an external audience, particularly through informal and digital communication channels (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014).

Early conceptualizations of employee advocacy have their roots in the literature on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Walden & Westerman, 2018), which refers to

discretionary behaviors (e.g., actions that go beyond one's official role, undertaken voluntarily to help the organization, such as positive word-of-mouth and defending the organization against criticism) that go beyond the formal requirements of the position and contribute to organizational effectiveness (Organ, 1997; Podsakoff et al., 2000). In this context, employee advocacy is viewed as a form of behavior that goes beyond job duties and is focused on communication.

In the field of marketing and communication, employee advocacy has also been associated with employee word-of-mouth, i.e employees' role in influencing external stakeholders through informal communication (Anderson, 1998). Similarly, Miles and Mangold (2004) conceptualize employees as internal brand ambassadors, responsible for conveying brand-consistent messages. Furthermore, in their research on social media, Rosandi et al. (2024) define this concept as "the act by which employees promote the organization's name, products, or services on their own social media platforms," which includes sharing information, publicly defending the company, or promoting its offerings.

Kim and Rhee (2011) refined this concept by distinguishing between 'megaphoning', which refers to employees' deliberate communication about their organization to an external audience, and 'micro-boundary spanning', which refers to interactions that bridge the internal and external environments.

With the rise of social media, the role of employees as brand ambassadors has taken on renewed importance. Digital platforms enable employees to reach broad and diverse audiences, which significantly amplifies the impact of their communication. As a result, organizations are increasingly implementing formal corporate ambassador programs to encourage and structure these behaviors (Altimeter, 2015).

Empirical studies suggest that employee advocacy helps strengthen an organization's credibility, consolidate relationships with stakeholders, and improve brand reputation (Grunig et al., 2002; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). In the field of recruitment, it has been demonstrated that employee advocacy positively influences the perception of the employer brand and the organization's attractiveness (Wilden et al., 2010). Recent literature reviews also emphasize that employee advocacy programs positively influence organizational reputation, consumer trust, and brand perception by enhancing the credibility of organizational communication (Mutuzo, 2024).

Overall, employee advocacy can be understood as a strategic communication behavior through which employees actively participate in shaping external perceptions of their organization (Sun et al., 2025).

2.2. Personal Branding

Across all disciplines, personal branding is viewed as a means for individuals to deliberately shape others' perceptions of them in order to gain professional and social advantages. Definitions vary, but they revolve around the concepts of strategic self-presentation, differentiation, and managing the impression one makes on others. In particular, Personal branding is a strategic process aimed at creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive self-image, based on a unique combination of individual characteristics, that conveys a promise to a target audience through a distinctive narrative and imagery (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Szántó 2023) . This term pertains to the process by which individuals deliberately manage and communicate their identity in order to influence how others perceive them (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque et al., 2011). It involves strategically highlighting skills, experiences, and values with the aim of creating a distinctive and recognizable professional image.

This concept is theoretically grounded in self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959), which posits that individuals actively manage the impression they make during social interactions. This perspective is complemented by impression management theory, which emphasizes the deliberate control of information in order to shape others' perceptions.

In digital environments, personal branding has taken on particular importance due to the widespread use of social media. These platforms offer individuals the opportunity to select and share content that reflects both their personal and professional identities, as well as to build a distinct digital identity aligned with their personal and professional aspirations through authenticity, content curation, and engagement (Vițelar 2019).

The Identity Expressiveness Theory (IET) (Van Zoonen et al., 2014) makes a key theoretical contribution to understanding these behaviors. This theory expands on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) by introducing identity-related motivations into social media use. According to the IET, employees communicate online to express:

- their personal identity, which reflects their values and individuality,

- their social identity, which reflects their membership in groups, including their organization.

This dual expression of identity is particularly important in the context of personal branding, as employees often incorporate elements specific to their organization into their personal narratives. As a result, personal branding activities frequently overlap with employees' efforts to promote the company.

Empirical studies indicate that personal branding enhances professional visibility, perceived expertise, and credibility (Gorbatov et al., 2020; Szántó 2023), which can indirectly benefit organizations by increasing the reach and impact of employee communication (Labrecque et al., 2011).

Thus, personal branding can be viewed as a strategic behavior at the individual level that contributes to both personal outcomes and those of the organization.

2.3. Employer Brand Attractiveness

Employer attractiveness (EA) is described as “*the envisioned benefits that a potential applicant sees in working for a specific organization in the future*” (Berthon et al., 2005). It refers to the perceived benefits that potential candidates associate with working for a given organization (Berthon et al., 2005). It is a subjective assessment of an employer's appeal in the eyes of potential or current employees, which influences their desire to apply or stay (Wilden et al., 2010; Dassler et al., 2022), reflecting the organization's ability to position itself as an attractive employer in the labor market.

According to Berthon et al. (2005), an employer's attractiveness encompasses multiple dimensions. In most empirical studies, these dimensions are based on values, including:

- economic value (e.g salary, security, promotions, benefits and material rewards),
- development value (e.g Training, career opportunities, recognition, self worth),
- social value (work environment such as friendly colleagues, good interpersonal and team climate),
- interest value (e.g innovative, challenging and meaningful work).

Subsequent studies have highlighted the strategic importance of employer branding in attracting and retaining talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). A strong employer brand helps reduce recruitment costs, boost employee advocacy, and improve organizational performance (Wilden et al., 2010).

In the digital age, perceptions of an employer brand are increasingly influenced by online content, particularly communications from employees. Compared to corporate messages, employee communications are perceived as more authentic and credible, which enhances their influence on potential candidates (Dabirian et al., 2017).

Consequently, employer brand attractiveness can be viewed as a perceived outcome resulting from both the organization's efforts and the communication processes initiated by employees. Although employee advocacy, personal branding, and employer brand attractiveness have been studied separately, their interrelationships remain under-explored.

Personal branding and employee advocacy are closely connected through identity expression processes. As suggested by Identity Expressiveness Theory, employees use social media to simultaneously express their personal and organizational identities. This implies that personal branding behaviors may naturally lead to advocacy behaviors.

At the same time, employee advocacy plays a critical role in shaping employer brand attractiveness by enhancing the credibility and reach of organizational communication.

Finally, personal branding may also directly influence employer attractiveness, as highly visible and credible employees can positively shape perceptions of their organization, even in the absence of explicit advocacy behaviors.

These conceptual linkages suggest the need for an integrative framework that captures both the direct and indirect relationships between these constructs.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

The development of the proposed conceptual model is grounded in an integrative theoretical approach that integrates complementary perspectives to explain the relationships between personal branding, employee advocacy, and employer brand attractiveness. More specifically, this study draws on Social Identity Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and identity expressiveness theory to underpin mechanisms linking these concepts.

3.1. Theoretical Integration

3.1.1. Social Identity Theory and Employee Advocacy

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive part of their identity from their membership in social groups. In organizational contexts, employees who strongly identify with their organization are more likely to engage in behaviors that reinforce a positive image of that group.

Prior research demonstrates that identification with the organization leads to communication behaviors such as positive word-of-mouth and advocacy (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Employees promote their organization not only to support it but also to reinforce their own social identity.

Recent research further confirms that organization-oriented internal social media communication strategies strengthen employees' organizational identification, which subsequently increases employees' extra-role social media advocacy behaviors (Lee et al., 2026).

This perspective positions employee advocacy as an identity-driven behavior, where promoting the organization contributes to self-definition.

3.1.2. Social Exchange Theory and Advocacy Behavior

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains employee behavior as a result of reciprocal exchanges between individuals and organizations. When employees perceive organizational support, fairness, and trust, they are more likely to reciprocate through discretionary behaviors.

Employee advocacy can therefore be interpreted as a form of reciprocal behavior emerging from positive organizational relationships (Organ, 1997; Podsakoff et al., 2000).

This theory reinforces the idea that employee advocacy is not only identity-based but also relationally driven, contributing to organizational outcomes such as reputation and attractiveness.

3.1.3. Identity Expressiveness Theory as a Linking Mechanism

Identity Expressiveness Theory (Van Zoonen et al., 2014) provides the key mechanism linking personal branding and employee advocacy.

According to this theory, employees use social media to express both:

- their personal identity,
- their organizational identity

This dual identity expression explains why personal branding activities often include organizational communication. Employees do not strictly separate self-promotion from organizational promotion; instead, both are intertwined in digital environments.

This theory justifies modeling personal branding as an antecedent of employee advocacy.

3.2. Hypotheses Development

3.2.1. Personal Branding and Employee Advocacy

Identity Expressiveness Theory suggests that employees use social media to express both individual and organizational identities. In a Kenyan study using a mixed-methods approach, personal branding emerged as a major motivator for online employee advocacy (29% of respondents), on par with alignment with company values (31%) (Muendo et al., 2025). In practice, employees engaged in personal branding frequently share professional content, including organizational information. Furthermore, a quantitative analysis of 363 profiles on LinkedIn of employees at a British pharmaceutical company revealed that characteristics related to personal branding were significant predictors of employee advocacy and other prosocial behaviors within the organization, thereby identifying “influential employees” as a distinct group (Kozsla et al., 2021). Overall, a strong personal brand often boosts employee advocacy by giving them the motivation and tools to engage for their employer while building their own reputation. This overlap implies that personal branding behaviors naturally foster advocacy behaviors.

H1: Personal branding positively influences employee advocacy.

3.2.2. Employee Advocacy and Employer Brand Attractiveness

Employee advocacy enhances the credibility and authenticity of organizational communication. Compared to corporate messages, employee-generated content is perceived as more trustworthy and less biased. Prior research suggests that employee advocacy improves the perception and attractiveness of the employer brand; they confirm that employee word-of-mouth communication for example enhances the credibility, reputation, and appeal of organizations (Wilden et al., 2010; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Dabirian et al., 2017)

As a result, employee advocacy plays a critical role in shaping employer brand perceptions, particularly among potential candidates.

H2: Employee advocacy positively influences employer brand attractiveness

3.2.3. Personal Branding and Employer Brand Attractiveness

Employees with strong personal brands are often perceived as credible, visible, and influential professionals. Their visibility can extend to their affiliated organization, thereby enhancing its attractiveness.

Personal branding contributes to expertise signaling, trust, and visibility, which may positively influence how the organization is perceived externally (Labrecque et al., 2011).

H3: Personal branding positively influences employer brand attractiveness.

3.2.4. Personal Branding and Employee Advocacy

Identity Expressiveness Theory suggests that employees use social media to express both individual and organizational identities. In a Kenyan study using a mixed-methods approach, personal branding emerged as a major motivator for online employee advocacy (29% of respondents), on par with alignment with company values (31%) (Muendo et al., 2025). In practice, employees engaged in personal branding frequently share professional content, including organizational information. Furthermore, a quantitative analysis of 363 profiles on LinkedIn of employees at a British pharmaceutical company revealed that characteristics related to personal branding were significant predictors of employee advocacy and other prosocial behaviors within the organization, thereby identifying “influential employees” as a distinct group (Kozsla et al., 2021). Overall, a strong personal brand often boosts employee advocacy by giving them the motivation and tools to engage for their employer while building their own reputation. This overlap implies that personal branding behaviors naturally foster advocacy behaviors.

H3: Personal branding positively influences employee advocacy.

3.2.5. Mediating Role of Employee Advocacy

While personal branding may directly influence employer brand attractiveness, its impact is likely to be partially transmitted through employee advocacy behaviors. Several studies demonstrate the role of the corporate ambassador as a mechanism for transmitting behavior,

conceptualizing the corporate ambassador as a form of voluntary communication that translates internal attitudes and identities into external outcomes (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014).

Thus, employees who develop strong personal brands are more likely to engage in communication that promotes their organization, thereby enhancing its attractiveness.

H4: Employee advocacy mediates the relationship between personal branding and employer brand attractiveness.

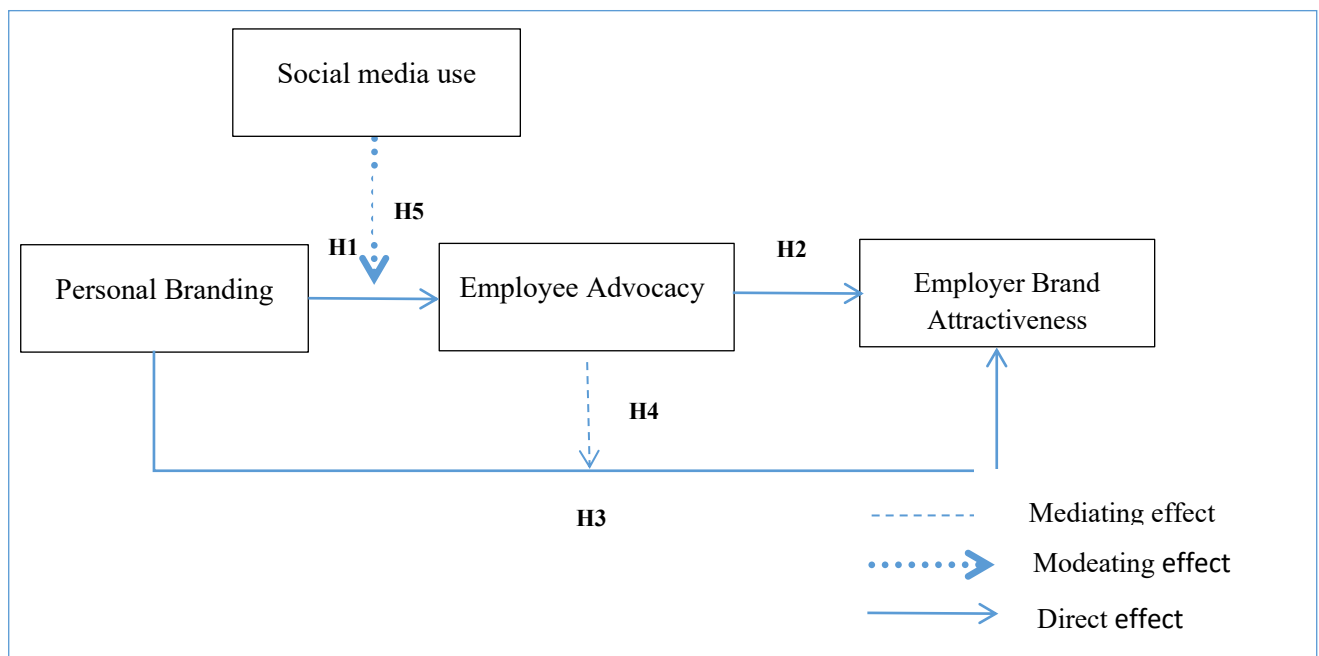
3.2.6. Moderating Role of Social Media Use

The intensity of social media use may strengthen the relationship between personal branding and employee advocacy (Ammani, 2025). Employees who are more active online have greater opportunities to express their identity and share organizational content.

H5: Social media use moderates the relationship between personal branding and employee advocacy.

3.3. Conceptual Model

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors

Taken together, these hypotheses propose a model in which personal branding influences employer brand attractiveness both directly and indirectly through employee advocacy, with social media use acting as an amplifying factor

Conclusion

This study examines the interaction between employee advocacy and personal branding, as well as their combined influence on employer brand attractiveness in the digital age. The analysis highlights that the evolution of digital communication has profoundly transformed the dynamics of organizational communication, placing employees at the heart of building the company's reputation and visibility (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Employees are no longer simply passive recipients of company messages; they actively contribute to the brand narrative through their presence on social media and their professional presentation.

This study shows that employee advocacy is a strategic organizational resource that strengthens the credibility and authenticity of the employer brand. Compared to traditional corporate communications, employee-generated content is often perceived as more trustworthy, which enhances the attractiveness of the employer brand and influences the perception of potential candidates (Dabirian et al., 2017; Edelman, 2020). At the same time, personal branding allows employees to build and communicate a consistent professional identity that can align with and reinforce organizational values (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shepherd, 2005).

This study highlights that the relationship between employee advocacy and the development of their personal brand is not isolated, but interdependent. When employees align their personal identity with that of the organization, they send consistent and credible signals that enhance the attractiveness of the employer brand. This dynamic is explained by Social Identity Theory, which emphasizes the role of identification in shaping behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and by Social Exchange Theory, which highlights the reciprocity between employees and organizations (Blau, 1964). These theoretical perspectives provide a solid framework for understanding why employees voluntarily engage in promotional behaviors that benefit their organization.

From a managerial perspective, the study highlights the importance of fostering a stimulating internal environment that encourages employee advocacy, organizational identification, and digital participation. Organizations that invest in transparent communication, employee

empowerment, and supportive leadership are more likely to leverage advocacy behaviors and strengthen their employer brand (Men, 2014; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This is particularly crucial in competitive labor markets, where employer brand attractiveness plays a key role in attracting and retaining talent.

Recent qualitative research also highlights that transparent internal communication and leadership messaging strengthen employees' willingness to act as authentic organizational advocates in digital environments (Oloba et al., 2025).

However, this study remains conceptual and does not empirically test the proposed relationships. Future research should therefore focus on empirically validating the model, particularly by examining mediating and moderating variables such as organizational culture, leadership style, and digital maturity. Furthermore, additional research is needed to explore potential tensions between personal brand autonomy and organizational control in employee communication practices.

In conclusion, this study enriches the literature by proposing an integrated framework that links employee advocacy and personal brand development within the context of employer branding. It highlights that in the digital age, employer brand attractiveness is increasingly built through employee behavior, positioning employees as strategic actors in organizational communication and the company's long-term success.

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