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Psychological contracts and employee-based brand equity: The mediating effects of digital employee branding and digital advocacy

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the mediating role of Digital Employee Branding (DEB) and Digital Employee Advocacy (DEA) in the relation between psychological contracts and Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE). This study uses a quantitative approach, based on a survey of 161 employees of a Toll Road Enterprise in Indonesia who use digital media in their work activities. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The results indicate that psychological contracts have a positive effect on EBBE. Furthermore, DEA is found to significantly mediate the relationship between psychological contracts and EBBE, while DEB does not demonstrate a significant mediating effect. These findings highlight the importance of fulfilling psychological contracts in fostering Digital Employee Advocacy, which in turn strengthens Employee-Based Brand Equity. This study contributes to the development of Resources Based Theory and Social Exchange Theories in the digital era and to practical implications for Human Resource Management and Organisational Communication.

Keywords: psychological contract; digital employee branding; digital employee advocacy; employee-based brand equity

1. Introduction

Human resources (HR) play a critical role in achieving sustainable competitive advantage, particularly in shaping organisational image, building trust, and influencing public perception. In the digital era, the strategic value of HR extends beyond operational efficiency, as employees increasingly act as key contributors to organisational reputation and brand communication. According to Barney (1991), sustainable competitive advantage depends on resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN), highlighting the importance of developing human capital that is adaptive, innovative, and aligned with organisational goals.

In the digital era, employees have increasing potential to act as active advocates who strengthen organisational brand presence through their social and professional networks. Prior studies (Cavdar Aksoy et al., 2023; Lee, 2021; Venciute et al., 2023) show that employee advocacy defined as the voluntary promotion of organisational values and services through digital platforms can enhance brand trust, customer engagement, and organisational performance. However, many organisations still struggle to effectively leverage this potential due to limited digital capabilities, inadequate training, and weak motivational systems (Arief et al., 2021; Saeed et al., 2023).

At the same time, human resource quality remains a key driver of brand image and customer perception (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Despite this, the mechanisms linking HR quality to brand-related outcomes, particularly through employee branding and advocacy in digital contexts, remain underexplored (Joyce et al., 2024). This indicates the need for a more integrated perspective that connects HR management, branding, and digital transformation in explaining how employees contribute to organisational performance.

Brand equity has been conceptualised from multiple perspectives, including financial-based, customer-based, and employee-based brand equity (EBBE). Among these, EBBE has gained increasing attention as employees are recognised as key actors in shaping organisational reputation and delivering authentic brand experiences (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; King & Grace, 2009). Employee interactions with customers significantly influence brand perception and loyalty, positioning employees not only as operational contributors but also as strategic agents in maintaining and strengthening brand value (Chung & Byrom, 2021; Iglesias et al., 2019).

Despite this growing attention, the mechanisms underlying the formation of EBBE remain insufficiently understood, particularly in the context of digital employee behaviour. Prior studies have largely focused on internal branding and employee engagement, with limited attention to how employees contribute to brand equity through digital platforms (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Sultan, 2022). In response to the increasing openness of digital communication, the concepts of Digital Employee Advocacy (DEA) and Digital Employee Branding (DEB) have emerged to explain how employees voluntarily promote organisational values and construct professional identities aligned with the organisational brand in digital spaces (Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020). These concepts position employees as digital ambassadors who play a crucial role in shaping organisational image and reputation in the digital era.

The development of Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) is closely linked to the fulfilment of psychological contracts, which represent the reciprocal expectations between employees and organisations that shape attitudes, motivation, and perceptions of organisational support (Chang et al., 2020; Herrera & De Las Heras-Rosas, 2021; Zacher & Rudolph, 2021). When these expectations are fulfilled, employees are more likely to develop emotional attachment and engage in voluntary behaviours that support organisational branding (Deepa & Baral, 2021). However, prior studies have reported inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between psychological contracts and EBBE, suggesting that this relationship may not be direct but influenced by contextual or behavioural mechanisms (Otoo et al., 2023). In the digital context, recent studies propose that Digital Employee Advocacy (DEA) and Digital Employee Branding (DEB) may serve as important mediating mechanisms linking psychological contracts to EBBE (Baca & Reshidi, 2023; Hasni et al., 2018; Hu, 2022; Yim, 2024). However, empirical evidence examining these mediating roles remains limited, and more importantly, there is still a lack of research that simultaneously investigates DEA and DEB within a single integrated model. Therefore, this study proposes DEA and DEB as complementary mechanisms to explain how psychological contracts are translated into brand-supporting behaviours, particularly within organisational contexts characterised by formal structures and controlled communication environments.

While prior studies have acknowledged the role of employees' digital activities in shaping brand perception, empirical research examining how employees' external digital networks contribute to brand-related outcomes remains limited (Špoljarić & Tkalac Verčič, 2022). Existing literature has largely focused on internal communication and traditional organisational contexts, with insufficient attention to how digital employee behaviour operates in more structured sectors and developing economies (Motsamai & Onyenankeya, 2025). This limitation restricts a comprehensive understanding of how employees' digital engagement, particularly through advocacy and branding activities, contributes to employee-based brand equity in contemporary organisational settings (Venciute et al., 2023).

This study investigates how psychological contracts influence Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) by examining the mediating roles of Digital Employee Advocacy (DEA) and Digital Employee Branding (DEB). Specifically, this research aims to clarify the mechanism through which psychological contracts are translated into brand-supporting behaviours in the digital context, addressing the lack of empirical evidence on the role of digital employee behaviour in shaping EBBE.

This study makes several contributions. First, it advances the understanding of EBBE by integrating psychological contract theory with digital employee behaviour, thereby extending its application within the context of digital transformation. Second, it proposes and empirically tests DEA and DEB as complementary mediating mechanisms within a single integrated model, addressing the limited research that simultaneously examines both constructs. Third, by situating the study within an infrastructure sector in a developing country, this research provides contextual insights into how organisational structure and communication control may influence digital employee engagement and its impact on brand equity.

2. Theoretical background

Resource-based view (RBV) and social exchange theory (SET)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) explains how organisations achieve sustainable competitive advantage through the effective utilisation of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). In the context of this study, human capital represents a critical strategic resource, particularly when employees actively contribute to organisational branding through their behaviours and interactions. Digital Employee Branding (DEB), Digital Employee Advocacy (DEA), and Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) can therefore be understood as manifestations of how human resources are leveraged as strategic assets in the digital environment. Employees who are aligned with organisational values and actively promote the brand contribute to the development of inimitable brand-related capabilities, strengthening organisational competitiveness.

While RBV explains the strategic importance of human resources, Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a behavioural explanation of how such resources generate value. SET posits that relationships between employees and organisations are governed by reciprocal (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When employees perceive that their psychological contracts are fulfilled, they are more likely to reciprocate through positive discretionary behaviours. In this study, such reciprocity

is reflected in digital employee behaviours, particularly DEA and DEB, which represent voluntary efforts to promote and embody organisational values in digital spaces.

Based on SET, the fulfilment of psychological contracts encourages employees to engage in advocacy behaviours (DEA) and to align their personal identity with organisational branding (DEB). These behaviours, in turn, contribute to the development of EBBE, as employees actively reinforce brand value through their interactions and communication. Conversely, when psychological contracts are not fulfilled, employees are less likely to engage in such discretionary behaviours, potentially weakening brand-related outcomes (Raj & Rehman, 2025; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020; Smith et al., 2021).

Integrating RBV and SET provides a coherent theoretical explanation for the proposed relationships. RBV explains why employee-related behaviours are strategically valuable for organisational performance, while SET explains how these behaviours emerge through reciprocal relationships. Together, these perspectives justify the role of DEA and DEB as key mechanisms through which psychological contracts are translated into employee-based brand equity in the digital context.

3. Hypotheses development

3.1. The role of psychological contracts in digital employee branding and digital employee advocacy

The psychological contract between employees and the organisation forms a crucial basis for determining how employees perceive and promote the company brand through digital activities. This occurs when employees feel that the unwritten expectations, responsibilities, and reciprocity within the employment relationship are met. (Rousseau, 1998), Employees will be more inclined to engage in digital employee branding because the satisfaction and appreciation they feel encourage them to share positive experiences across digital platforms. Previous research supports this relationship, showing that positive psychological contracts increase employee participation in digital promotional activities.(Sandeepanie et al., 2023; Van Der Schaft et al., 2020), while strengthening their sense of ownership of the organisation. Other research shows that emotional connectedness drives supportive behaviour in the digital space(Levy, 2022). Positive perceptions of psychological contracts can increase employee commitment, which, in turn, triggers active involvement in digital employee branding as a form of loyalty and support for the organisation's reputation(Bari et al., 2020).

H1. *Psychological Contracts have a positive effect on Digital Employee Branding*

Employees who feel valued and supported are more likely to express loyalty and belonging through digital advocacy, according to Research fromSakkaby Sakka & Ahmad (2020), which shows that advocacy not only promotes the company's services but also reflects their emotional attachment to the organisation. Researchby Singh & Misra (2021) and Akgunduz et al. (2023) also showed that positive work relationships and the fulfilment of psychological contracts increase employees' likelihood of

engaging in advocacy behaviours that support the company's reputation. Therefore, the more positive employees' perceptions of their psychological contracts, the higher their level of participation in digital employee advocacy.

H2. *Psychological contracts have a positive effect on Digital Employee Advocacy*

3.2. The influence of digital employee advocacy on employee-based brand equity

The relationship between *Digital Employee Advocacy* (DEA) and *Employee-Based Brand Equity* (EBBE) is reflected in employees' active role in promoting and supporting the organisation's brand through digital platforms, which has been proven to strengthen internal brand perception. Employee advocacy is a form of proactive communication that supports the organisation's image. When employees voluntarily participate in digital promotions, it not only improves the company's reputation but also strengthens their attachment to the brand as a key element of EBBE.(Thelen, 2020). The active participation of employees in promoting the brand contributes to their loyalty and wellbeing, thus strengthening the loyalty dimension in EBBE (Benraiss-Noailles & Viot, 2021). Voluntary and consistent brand advocacy is an important factor in building brand equity by increasing trust and recognition (Bhati & Verma, 2020). In the context of social media, Aljumah (2023) found that digital marketing activities, including employee advocacy, can elicit positive responses and strengthen brand perceptions, thereby influencing employees' positive evaluations of the organisation's brand.

H3. *Digital Employee Advocacy positively affects Employee-Based Brand Equity.*

3.3. The influence of digital employee branding and digital employee advocacy on employee-based brand equity

Digital Employee Branding (DEB) refers to employees' active involvement in promoting and building the organisation's brand image through various digital activities, ranging from positive social media branding to participation in collaborations and branding campaigns (Benraiss-Noailles & Viot, 2021). DEB activities shape employee loyalty and positive brand perceptions, which are important factors in the formation of Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) (Hyun et al., 2024). In addition, digital channels such as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) significantly increase brand equity, strengthening the EBBE dimension when employees actively spread a positive image of the company (Sun et al., 2021). Positive brand perception resulting from digital branding activities also plays an important role in maintaining and increasing EBBE (Tasci, 2021).

H4. *Digital Employee Branding positively affects Employee-Based Brand Equity.*

Moreover, a consistently fulfilled psychological contract plays a vital role in shaping Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE), as when organisations meet employees' expectations for wellbeing, support, flexibility, and development opportunities, employees feel a stronger emotional connection to the organisation and demonstrate higher commitment and loyalty to the company brand (Coetzee & Deas, 2021). Social support from coworkers and superiors also strengthens this positive perception, so that employees feel more valued and psychologically connected to the

organisation, which ultimately increases their positive attitude towards the internal brand (Wang et al., 2023). In addition, fulfilling psychological needs such as recognition, feeling appreciated, and intrinsic motivation strengthens employee identification with the organisation, which, in turn, increases the perception of brand value and reputation from the employee's perspective (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). Overall, a firm psychological contract has been shown to increase employee loyalty, sense of belonging, and commitment to the organizationorganization, thereby forming and strengthening employee-based brand equity.(Siqueira et al., 2021; Venciute et al., 2023).

H5: *Psychological contracts have a positive effect on Employee-Based Brand Equity.*

3.4. The role of dual mediators (digital employee branding, and digital employee advocacy)

The fulfilment of psychological contracts makes employees feel fair, trusted, and part of a positive, reciprocal relationship with the organisation, thereby encouraging them to exhibit behaviour that supports the organisation's brand identity and reputation(Deepa & Baral, 2021). When the psychological Contract is fulfilled, employees are encouraged to express the organisation's values and messages through digital employee branding activities as a form of reciprocation for the company's favourable treatment (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020). These digital activities strengthen employee-based brand equity by increasing employee digital representation, credibility, message consistency, and brand image in the public sphere (Lee et al., 2020). Thus, psychological contracts are expected to influence employee-based brand equity through digital employee branding, serving as a connecting mechanism that explains how perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment can be transmitted into employee-based brand value(Soleimani et al., 2023).

The relationship between psychological contracts and Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) shows that psychological contract fulfilment plays an important role in increasing employee trust, engagement, and positive perceptions of the organisation's brand. In contrast, contract breaches decrease engagement and damage internal brand image (Sahu et al., 2018). Fulfilment of psychological contracts through effective communication has been shown to strengthen EBBE by increasing positive perceptions and employee trust in the organisation (Deepa & Baral, 2021). Several studies have shown that psychological contracts also influence employee engagement in brand communications and advocacy behavior, although they have not directly highlighted the digital context as a mediator (Achnak et al., 2022; She et al., 2020; Thelen, 2020). In the context of digital transformation, internal digital branding strategies have been shown to strengthen the relationship between employee behavior and brand perception, making digital elements relevant as potential mediating factors (Ahmad et al., 2022; Herhausen et al., 2020).

H6: *Digital employee branding mediates the relationship between psychological contracts and employee-based brand equity.*

H7: *Digital employee advocacy mediates the relationship between psychological contracts and employee-based brand equity.*

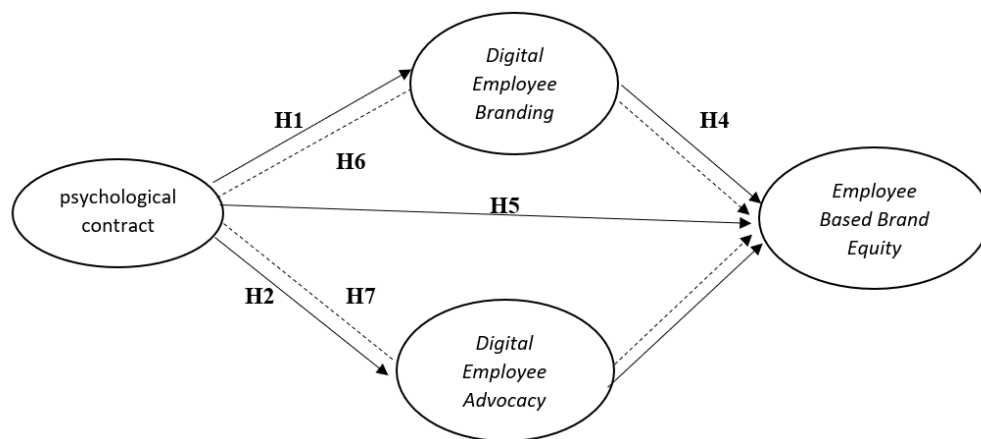


Figure 1. Research model.

4. Method

Population, sample, and data collection

The survey methodology was employed to collect primary data for empirical analysis. The population of this study consists of employees working in Toll Road Business Entities (BUJTs) across Indonesia. Employees were selected as the unit of analysis because this study focuses on individual perceptions and behaviours related to psychological contracts, digital employee advocacy, digital employee branding, and employee-based brand equity.

A purposive sampling technique was applied by selecting employees from BUJTs with more than 100 employees and at least five years of operational experience. These criteria were used to ensure that respondents operate within relatively established organisational structures, with formalised human resource management practices and sufficient exposure to digital communication and branding activities. Such conditions are considered important for examining digital employee behaviour and its relationship to brand-related outcomes.

Data collection was conducted in several stages. First, a list of BUJTs and their organisational profiles was compiled based on official data from the BPJT website to develop the sampling frame. Second, selected organisations were approached to obtain permission and identify contact persons who could facilitate questionnaire distribution. Third, a structured questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms through organisational representatives.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections: demographic information (e.g., gender, age, tenure, and education level) and measurement items adapted from prior studies, using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Prior to data collection, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with employee representatives, and the instrument was reviewed by academic experts to ensure clarity and content validity.

A total of 162 responses were collected, of which 161 were deemed valid for analysis. This sample size is considered adequate for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), as suggested by Hair et al. (2019), who recommend a minimum sample size of 100–200 for models of moderate complexity. Therefore, the final sample meets the

minimum requirement and is sufficient to support the analysis of the proposed research model.

In the context of the toll road sector, empirical research examining the role of employee advocacy and employee branding is still very limited. Most previous studies have focused on the service and retail industries (Dekimpe, 2020). At the same time, attention to the influence of HR quality on brand image and organisational performance in infrastructure services is still minimal (Aggarwal & Agarwala, 2023; Al-Swidi et al., 2021; Barros-Arrieta & Garc ía-Cali, 2021; Dženopoljac et al., 2023; Hassan & Jaaron, 2021).

5. Measures

5.1. Employee-based brand equity

Employee-based brand equity is the value added by employees through branding behaviour. This variable is measured using five indicators from the employee perspective: brand image, brand impact, brand values, brand beliefs, and brand experience. These items are developed through a combination of Baumgarth & Schmidt (2010). Items are measured using a 1-5 Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

5.2. Digital employee branding

Digital Employee Branding is the ability of employees to understand and convey the company's brand image to customers and stakeholders through digital platforms. It is measured using a five-point Likert scale, with five indicators adapted from King et al. (2012) and Miles et al. (2011): representation of company values, consistency in digital communication, participation in company branding, awareness of digital branding, and digital credibility and professionalism.

5.3. Digital employee advocacy

Digital Employee Advocacy is the process by which employees voluntarily share positive content and advocate for the company on digital platforms. It is measured using a five-point Likert scale adapted from Lee (2021) and Men (2014). Three leading indicators are used in the measurement: self-enhancement, altruism, and enjoyment.

5.4. Psychological contract

Psychological Contract is an employee's belief in the unwritten reciprocal obligations between the employee and the organisation. The measurement includes skills development, namely the extent to which employees feel facilitated to improve their competence, increased competitiveness, career development, and organizational support (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004).

5.5. Data analysis and measurement model

Statistical analysis and hypothesis testing

The researchers followed the procedures used by Mathieu and Taylor (2006) and conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for all model constructs. AMOS 22

software was used for data analysis. The results of the goodness-of-fit test for the research model in **Table 1** indicate a chi-square value of 305.807 and a p-value of 0.000. In general, a p-value below 0.05 indicates that the model does not fit the data well. However, the chi-square statistic is known to be very sensitive to sample size, so it is often not used as the sole indicator of model suitability. Other indices are used to provide a more comprehensive picture of model suitability.

The CMIN/DF index of 1.618 is below the maximum limit of 2.00, thus indicating a good fit. This indicates that the comparison between chi-square and degrees of freedom is still in the good category. The RMSEA value of 0.062 also meets the good fit criteria because it is below the 0.08 threshold, indicating a relatively small model approximation error.

Meanwhile, the GFI value of 0.863 and the AGFI of 0.816 are slightly below the cut-off value of 0.90, indicating a marginal fit. This means the model's fit to the actual data is moderate, though not optimal. The TLI value of 0.967 and CFI of 0.973 exceed the minimum limit of 0.95, so both are included in the good fit category and indicate that the model has a perfect fit compared to the independent model. Based on the criteria proposed by Hair Jr et al. (2019), which state that if 4-5 goodness-of-fit indices are met, the model can be declared suitable, this research model can be considered adequate for further analysis. **Table 1** shows model fit of the model measurement.

Table 1. Model fit of the measurement model.

Model	Chi-square	Probability	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI
	305,807	0,000	1,618	0.062	0.863	0.816	0.967	0.973

5.6. Measurement model

Convergent validity is determined by meeting three criteria, as stated by Fornell & Larcker (1981) and Hair Jr et al. (2019): all factor loadings must exceed 0.60. The Construct Reliability (CR) value must exceed 0.70, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value must be greater than 0.50. The calculation results in **Table 2** show that all indicators in the Psychological Contract (PC), Digital Employee Branding (DEB), Digital Employee Advocacy (DEA), and Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) variables have factor loadings above 0.70, with CR values ranging from 0.90 to 0.97 and AVE between 0.70 and 0.82. Thus, all constructs meet the criteria for convergent validity.

Table 2. Descriptive and discriminant validity.

Construct	Mean	Elementary school	CR	AVE	Correlation between constructs			
					PC	DEB	DEA	EBBE
PC	4.32	0.921	0.904	0.703	PC	1		
DEB	4.20	0.933	0.957	0.818	DEB	0.858	1	
DEA	4.15	0.914	0.972	0.816	DEA	0.842	0.903	1
EBBE	4.30	0.876	0.950	0.795	EBBE	0.925	0.889	0.866

5.7. Structural model

Evaluation of the measurement model's quality was conducted through tests of convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was assessed through composite reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The analysis results showed that all constructs had CR values above 0.70, ranging from 0.904 to 0.972, and AVE values ranging from 0.703 to 0.818. This meets the criteria recommended by Hair et al. (2013). Therefore, it can be concluded that the indicators used consistently and validly represent the constructs.

Furthermore, discriminant validity was tested by comparing the square roots of the constructs' AVEs with the correlations among them. The results showed that although the correlations between constructs were relatively high (for example, the correlation between PC and EBBE was 0.925), the square root of the AVE of each construct was still greater than the correlations between other constructs. Thus, this measurement model met the requirements for discriminant validity.

The next step is to test the quality of the structural model by examining the relationships among latent constructs. Based on the analysis results, all relationship paths proposed in the hypothesis show a positive and significant influence ($p < 0.001$). The correlation between PC and EBBE of 0.925 is classified as strong. At the same time, the relationships between DEB and DEA (0.903) and between DEB and EBBE (0.889) are also categorised as strong influences. Meanwhile, the relationship between DEA and EBBE (0.866) also shows a strong correlation. According to the criteria proposed by Diamantopoulos & Siguaw (2000), a correlation coefficient above 0.60 indicates a powerful and significant influence. Thus, this finding confirms that all tested constructs are not only reliable and valid but also closely and mutually reinforcing within the research model.

Furthermore, the results of the structural hypothesis testing show several important findings. First, the path from PC to DEB produces a positive coefficient ($\beta = 0.839$), but it is not significant ($p > 0.05$), so the hypothesis is not supported. Conversely, the path from PC to DEA shows a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.964$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the hypothesis. The path from DEA to EBBE also shows a significant positive result ($\beta = 0.204$, $p = 0.011$), supporting the hypothesis. Meanwhile, the path from DEB to EBBE is not significant ($\beta = 0.108$, $p = 0.224$), so the hypothesis is not supported. Finally, the path from PC to EBBE shows a significant positive result ($\beta = 0.484$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the hypothesis.

In addition, the mediation test using the Sobel test shows that the path from PC to EBBE via DEB mediation is not significant ($t = 1.206$; $p = 0.22$), indicating that DEB does not mediate the relationship between PC and EBBE. On the other hand, the path of PC to EBBE through DEA shows significant results ($t = 2.252$; $p = 0.024$), which means that DEA significantly mediates the influence of PC on EBBE.

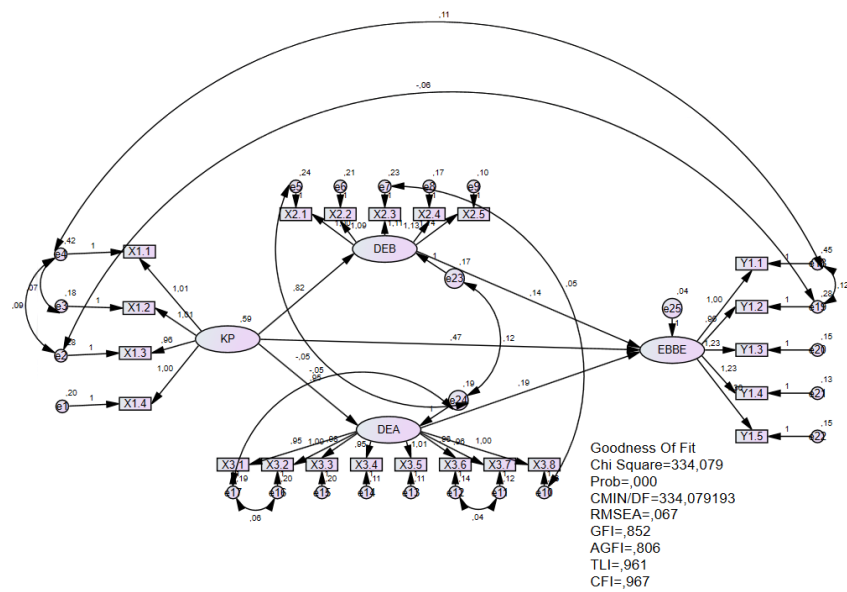


Figure 2. Full Model.

5.8. Discussion and conclusion

Table 3 summarises the results of the structural model testing proposed in this study. In general, the model shows adequate fit, allowing for path interpretation. In H1, this study tested the relationship between Psychological Contract (PC) and Digital Employee Branding (DEB). The results showed a positive and insignificant influence ($B = 0.839$; $CR = 10.867$; $p = 0.839$), so the hypothesis was not supported. In H2, the path from PC to digital employee advocacy (DEA) showed a significant effect with a powerful influence ($B = 0.964$; $CR = 12.271$; $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Meanwhile, in H3, testing the effect of DEA on employee-based brand equity (EBBE) was significant ($B = 0.204$; $CR = 2.542$; $p = 0.011$), supporting the hypothesis for this path. In the H4 test, the DEB path to EBBE showed a positive but insignificant influence ($B = 0.108$; $CR = 1.215$; $p = 0.224$), so the hypothesis was not supported. Meanwhile, H5 showed that PC had a positive and significant effect on EBBE ($B = 0.484$; $CR = 5.350$; $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting this hypothesis.

Table 3. Structural Model.

c	Track	B	SE	CR	P
H1	PC→DEB	0.839	0.077	10,867	0.839
H2	PC→ DEA	0.964	0.079	12,271	***
H3	DEA→EBBE	0.204	0.08	2,542	0.011
H4	DEB→EBBE	0.108	0.089	1,215	0.224
H5	PC→EBBE	0.484	0.09	5.35	***

This study also tested the mediating role, as shown in **Table 4**, hypothesised in H6 and H7. The Sobel test results showed that the PC path to EBBE through DEB mediation (H6) was found to be insignificant ($t = 1.206$; $p = 0.220$), so DEB was unable to mediate the relationship between PC and EBBE. Conversely, mediation

through DEA (H7) was proven significant ($t = 2.252$; $p = 0.024$). This means that DEA effectively mediates the influence of PC on EBBE, thus confirming the important role of digital employee advocacy in strengthening Employee-Based Brand Equity.

Table 4. Mediation test.

Hypothesis	Track	Sobel test	
		t-stat	p value
H6	PC→DEB→EBBE	1,206	0.22
H7	PC→DEA→EBBE	2,252	0.024

Although the overall model demonstrates an acceptable fit and allows for hypothesis testing, it is important to note that some goodness-of-fit indices, particularly GFI and AGFI, fall below the recommended threshold. This indicates a marginal model fit, suggesting that the model may not fully capture the complexity of the relationships among the studied variables. Therefore, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution.

This limitation also implies that there may be additional factors influencing employee-based brand equity that were not included in the current model. Future research is encouraged to refine the model by incorporating other relevant constructs or improving measurement indicators to achieve a better model fit.

6. Discussion

This study provides empirical insights into how psychological contracts influence employee-based brand equity (EBBE) through digital employee behaviours, particularly Digital Employee Advocacy (DEA) and Digital Employee Branding (DEB). The findings reveal that while psychological contracts play a significant role in shaping advocacy behaviour and brand equity, their influence on identity-based digital branding remains limited. These results highlight the importance of distinguishing between different forms of digital employee behaviour in explaining how internal organisational relationships are translated into brand-related outcomes.

The non-significant relationship between psychological contracts and DEB suggests that fulfilling employee expectations alone is insufficient to drive identity-based branding behaviour in digital spaces. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory (SET), although employees may perceive a fair exchange relationship, not all forms of reciprocity manifest equally. DEB requires a deeper level of identity alignment and personal-brand integration, which goes beyond transactional or relational exchanges. In highly regulated organisational contexts, such as infrastructure or public service sectors, employees may face constraints in expressing their professional identity online due to organisational norms, communication control, and perceived risks associated with personal visibility. From the standpoint of Resource-Based View (RBV), this finding indicates that the potential of DEB as a strategic intangible asset has not been fully realised, as employees' personal branding capabilities remain underutilised and constrained by organisational structures (Santos et al., 2023; Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2025). the potential of DEB as a strategic human capital resource has not been fully utilised because the representation of employees'

personal brands remains limited by organisational norms and regulations. This finding aligns with studies (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2019) that show public organisations tend to exert substantial control over employees' digital expression, thereby reducing self-branding initiatives on social media.

In contrast, the significant effect of psychological contracts on DEA confirms that advocacy behaviour is more directly influenced by reciprocal relationships between employees and organisations. In line with SET, when employees perceive organisational support, fairness, and trust, they are more likely to reciprocate through voluntary behaviours such as promoting organisational values and sharing positive experiences in digital environments. Compared to DEB, advocacy represents a lower-risk and more accessible form of engagement, as it does not require deep identity integration but rather behavioural support (Thelen et al., 2022). Previous studies have shown that strong relationships between organisations and employees can trigger authentic employee advocacy behaviour (Liu et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). From an RBV perspective, DEA represents a valuable organisational capability, as employees act as credible communicators who extend the organisation's brand reach through their personal networks, thereby creating a form of inimitable social capital.

Furthermore, the significant relationship between psychological contracts and EBBE demonstrates that strong relational exchanges contribute directly to the development of internal brand value. This finding reinforces SET by showing that trust and fulfilment of expectations foster emotional attachment, loyalty, and identification with the organisation. In the digital context, such attachment becomes increasingly important, as employees serve as both internal stakeholders and external brand representatives (Ayu et al., 2024; Li, 2022). From an RBV perspective, employee commitment and brand identification constitute strategic resources that enhance organisational competitiveness, as they are socially complex and difficult for competitors to replicate (Barney, 1991; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

The mediation analysis further clarifies the underlying mechanisms of these relationships. The non-significant mediating role of DEB indicates that identity-based digital branding is not the primary pathway through which psychological contracts influence EBBE. This suggests that structural and contextual constraints limit the translation of internal satisfaction into personal branding behaviour. Employees may feel positively toward the organisation but still refrain from projecting their professional identity online due to concerns about control, authenticity, or reputational risk. Consequently, despite its theoretical potential, DEB does not function effectively as a mediating mechanism in this context (Del Bosco et al., 2023). This result aligns with studies (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2019) that show that corporate communication regulations often limit self-branding expression.

Conversely, DEA emerges as a significant mediator, highlighting its central role in linking psychological contracts to EBBE. This finding extends SET by demonstrating that reciprocal relationships are not confined to internal organisational behaviours but also manifest in digital forms of advocacy. Employees translate their positive perceptions into outward-facing actions that reinforce brand value in the public domain (Torro et al., 2022). From an RBV perspective, DEA leverages employees' social networks and credibility to enhance brand equity, making it a strategically valuable and scalable resource (Thelen et al., 2022). This result

underscores that advocacy, rather than identity-based branding, is the primary behavioural pathway through which organisations can strengthen employee-based brand equity in the digital era.

These findings offer several practical implications. First, organisations should prioritise strengthening psychological contracts through transparent communication, fair treatment, and consistent organisational support, as these factors directly influence employee advocacy and brand equity. Second, given the strong role of DEA, organisations should develop structured digital advocacy programmes, including training, clear communication guidelines, and incentives that encourage employees to share positive organisational content. Third, the limited role of DEB suggests that organisations need to create a more supportive environment for personal branding by reducing excessive communication control and fostering trust in employees' digital expression. Without such structural support, efforts to promote employee branding may remain ineffective.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by integrating Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Resource-Based View (RBV) to explain how psychological contracts influence employee-based brand equity (EBBE) through digital employee behaviour. The findings indicate that psychological contracts play a significant role in encouraging digital employee advocacy (DEA) and directly strengthening EBBE, while their effect on digital employee branding (DEB) is not statistically significant. These results suggest that not all forms of digital employee behaviour are equally influenced by relational factors within organisations.

The study highlights that DEA serves as the primary behavioural mechanism through which psychological contracts are translated into brand-related outcomes. Employees who perceive fairness, trust, and organisational support are more likely to engage in advocacy behaviours, such as sharing positive organisational content and promoting company values in digital spaces. In contrast, DEB does not demonstrate a significant mediating role, indicating that identity-based digital branding may depend on additional organisational and individual factors beyond psychological contracts.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organisations should prioritise strengthening psychological contracts through consistent support, transparent communication, and opportunities for employee development. In particular, fostering digital employee advocacy through structured programmes, clear communication guidelines, and supportive organisational climates may be more effective in enhancing employee-based brand equity. Meanwhile, efforts to promote digital employee branding may require a more enabling environment, including greater communication autonomy and reduced constraints on employee digital expression.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that could guide further research. First, the study is subject to methodological limitations related to model fit. Although most goodness-of-fit indices indicate an acceptable model, the GFI and AGFI values fall

below the recommended threshold, suggesting a marginal fit. This indicates that the model may not fully capture the complexity of the relationships among the studied variables, and therefore the results should be interpreted with caution. Future research is encouraged to refine the model by incorporating additional relevant variables or improving measurement indicators to achieve a better model fit.

Second, this study relies on self-reported data collected from a single source, which may introduce the risk of common method bias (CMB). Although efforts were made to minimise bias through questionnaire design and respondent anonymity, the possibility of inflated relationships between variables cannot be entirely ruled out. Future studies are therefore encouraged to adopt multi-source data, longitudinal designs, or objective measures to enhance the robustness of the findings.

Furthermore, the research context, which focuses on Toll Road Business Entities (BUJT) in Indonesia as public or semi-government organisations with bureaucratic structures, may influence the low significance of digital employee branding (DEB) in mediating the influence of psychological contracts on employee-based brand equity (EBBE). This is likely due to limited digital expression space and strict communication controls (Men & Yue, 2019; Karanges et al., 2021). Therefore, the findings related to DEB may be context-specific and should not be generalised without caution.

Future studies are advised to explore the dynamics of psychological contracts and digital employee advocacy through qualitative approaches to gain deeper insights into employee behaviour. In addition, future research could examine the impact of digital employee advocacy on organisational performance through employee-based brand equity. This is important because employee perceptions of organisational effectiveness may provide further evidence of how digital advocacy contributes to organisational outcomes.

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