

Bridging Employer Branding and Talent Management: A Transformational Leadership Perspective from the Manufacturing Industry

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ABSTRACT

Talent management has become a strategic priority for manufacturing firms operating in increasingly competitive labour markets, yet the organizational mechanisms that drive it and the role leadership plays in activating them remain underexplored, particularly outside Western, services-sector contexts. This study examines the relationship between employer branding and talent management among middle-management employees in Malaysia's electrical and electronics (E&E) manufacturing sector, and tests whether this relationship is mediated by transformational leadership. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design grounded in social exchange theory, data were collected from 113 middle managers across nine E&E manufacturing organizations in Negeri Sembilan and analysed using multiple regression and the Sobel test for mediation. Employer branding both as a composite construct and across its six value dimensions (economic, social, development, application, interest, and work-life balance) was found to be positively and significantly related to talent management. Employer branding was also positively related to transformational leadership, which in turn was positively related to talent management, and transformational leadership was found to partially mediate the relationship between employer branding and talent management. Work-life balance emerged as the strongest individual predictor of talent management, ahead of more established dimensions such as economic and development value. These findings suggest that employer branding's influence on talent outcomes operates substantially through the leadership behaviours it helps cultivate, offering both a theoretical bridge between the employer branding and leadership literatures and practical guidance for manufacturing firms seeking to strengthen talent attraction, development, and retention through combined branding and leadership-development strategies.

Keywords: employer branding; talent management; transformational leadership; mediation; manufacturing; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Human capital continues to represent one of the most durable sources of competitive advantage available to firms in a knowledge-driven economy (Chakraborty, 2020), with direct consequences for organizational performance and business outcomes (Trivedi & Truss, 2019; Zinar, 2020). Within human resource management, talent management has become a central strategic concern (Toterhi & Recardo, 2019), yet much of the existing literature has concentrated narrowly on the skills and competencies required of individual employees rather than on the organizational mechanisms that attract, develop, and retain that talent (Efendi, 2021; Horvathova, 2020). This narrow framing leaves an important gap: the organizational-level drivers of talent management outcomes, and the leadership processes that activate them, remain comparatively under-examined.

This gap is particularly consequential in emerging economies undergoing rapid industrial transformation. In Malaysia, talent has been positioned as a core enabler of the country's shift toward a productivity-driven, knowledge-intensive, and innovation-led economy (Hongal & Kinange, 2020; Yildiz & Esme, 2021), a shift reflected in successive national initiatives such as the Government Transformation Programme and the Economic Transformation Programme (Aina & Atan, 2020). Nowhere is this more evident than in the electrical and electronics (E&E) manufacturing sector, which has grown from a labour-intensive industry in the 1970s into one of the twelve National Key Economic Areas underpinning Malaysia's manufacturing exports and employment (Osman et al., 2020; MIDA, 2021). The semiconductor sub-segment continues to expand on the back of strong global demand (Nadarajah, 2021), intensifying the sector's reliance on a steady supply of skilled talent (TalentCorp, 2023).

That reliance has, however, exposed persistent talent management challenges. Industry reports and academic studies alike point to skills gaps between institutions of higher learning and industry requirements, difficulty attracting entry-level talent, and most acutely high turnover and attrition of experienced employees to competing sectors and countries (Moshood et al., 2021; Manshor & Yong, 2022; CY Whah, 2018). These pressures place the E&E sector's ability to sustain its competitiveness at risk and have renewed practitioner and scholarly interest in the organizational strategies capable of addressing them (Ananthan et al., 2019; Vaiman et al., 2012).

Employer branding has emerged as one candidate strategy. By projecting an organization's culture, values, and reputation to current and prospective employees, employer branding functions as a long-term pull strategy for talent attraction and retention (Huseynova, Matošková, & Gregar, 2022; Amelia & Nasution, 2016), shaping how an organization is perceived from the standpoint of a prospective employee (Maheshwari et al., 2017). A growing body of work links strong employer branding to more effective talent management outcomes (Edwards, 2017; Priya, Gobinath, & Raman, 2021; Ibrahim, 2023), suggesting that how an organization brands itself as an employer is not incidental to talent management but constitutive of it.

Less settled, however, is the mechanism through which this relationship operates. Leadership has been identified as integral to translating employer branding into tangible talent outcomes (Monteiro et al., 2020), with transformational leadership behaviours particularly engagement and empowerment repeatedly associated with more effective talent management (Veldsman & Johnson, 2016; Mey, Poisat, & Stindt, 2021). Yet while transformational leadership has been studied in relation to talent management (Onyango, 2015; Wahba, 2016; Sanjeev & Singh, 2017; Bingab, 2019) and, separately, in relation to branding (Lenka & Chawla, 2015; Maurya & Agarwal, 2015; Iglesias, 2016), few studies have tested transformational leadership as a mediating mechanism linking employer branding to talent management within a single model and none, to the researchers' knowledge, within Malaysia's E&E manufacturing context specifically.

This study addresses that gap by examining the relationship between employer branding and talent management, and testing whether this relationship is mediated by transformational leadership, among middle-management employees in Malaysia's E&E manufacturing sector. In doing so, the paper contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it consolidates six previously fragmented employer branding value dimensions such as economic, social, development, application, interest, and work-life balance into a single empirical test of their collective relationship with talent management. Second, it extends this relationship by positioning transformational leadership as a mediating mechanism, offering both a theoretical bridge between the employer branding and leadership literatures and a practical basis for manufacturing firms seeking to address talent attrition through leadership development alongside branding investment.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Talent Management

Talent management refers to how an organization identifies, develops, and retains employees regarded as high-potential or high-performing, and coordinates this process across organizational functions to meet strategic goals (Holm & Hutsch, 2016; Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015). More recent formulations frame it as the systematic identification, recruitment, placement, engagement, and retention of individuals an organization deems "high potential" (CIPD, 2020). Scholars generally distinguish between an inclusive approach, which treats all employees as possessing valuable talent, and an exclusive or strategic approach, which concentrates resources on a subset of top-performing employees (Holm & Hutsch, 2016; Savanevičienė & Vilčiauskaitė, 2017) with

some arguing organizations benefit from integrating both (Mosley, 2014). For the purposes of this study, talent management is treated as a deliberate effort to attract, develop, and retain individuals capable of meeting an organization's current and future demands (Mahlahla, 2018), a framing that positions attraction and retention rather than only individual competency as the proper unit of analysis, and one that aligns with this paper's interest in the organizational and leadership antecedents of talent outcomes.

Employer Branding and Its Dimensions

Employer branding was first conceptualised by Ambler and Barrow (1996) as comprising three dimensions of value offered to employees: functional (career-related activities), economic (financial rewards), and psychological (a sense of belonging) though without an accompanying measurement scale (Zhu et al., 2014). Berthon, Ewing, and Hah (2005) subsequently operationalised employer attractiveness across five dimensions: interest, social, economic, development, and application value. Later studies have proposed alternative dimension sets suited to different contexts for instance, economic, growth, social, and brand-trust dimensions in the Chinese private sector (Jiang & Iles, 2011), and six dimensions distinguishing employer branding preferences by gender and employment status (Almıaçık et al., 2014) underscoring that the salient dimensions of employer branding are context-dependent rather than universal.

For the manufacturing context examined here, this study adopts Berthon et al.'s (2005) five value dimensions together with a sixth, work-life balance, following Sahi (2019), whose relevance has grown as an under examined but increasingly cited attractiveness factor. Economic value captures the appeal of competitive compensation, benefits, and job security (Reis & Braga, 2016); social value reflects a collegial, team-oriented work climate (R. Sharma et al., 2019); development value concerns recognition and career-advancing opportunity (Hadi & Ahmed, 2018); application value reflects the degree to which employees can apply and share their knowledge in a customer-oriented setting (Dabirian et al., 2017); interest value captures the appeal of innovative, creativity-enabling work (R. Sharma et al., 2019); and work-life balance reflects the degree of harmony an employer enables between professional and personal life (Hadi & Ahmed, 2018; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

Underpinning Theory: Social Exchange Theory

This study draws on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to explain the psychological mechanism connecting employer branding, transformational leadership, and talent management. Social exchange theory models workplace relationships as an ongoing cost-benefit exchange in which employees reciprocate organizational investment with favourable attitudes and behaviours (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Cropanzano et al., 2017). Applied to talent management, the theory suggests that when organizations visibly invest in talented employees whether through branding, leadership, or development practices. Those employees respond with greater commitment, engagement, and reduced turnover intention, consistent with a norm of reciprocity (Björkman et al., 2013; Khoreva et al., 2017). This logic underlies the present study's expectation that employer branding investment, reinforced by transformational leadership, will elicit reciprocal engagement that manifests in improved talent management outcomes.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, first articulated by Burns (1978) in the context of political leadership and later extended to organizational settings, describes a style in which leaders elevate followers' motivation and ethical engagement through a compelling vision (Burkus, 2020). Bass (1985) expanded this into four defining behaviours. Idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration (the "four I's") through which leaders act as role models, motivators, innovators, and coaches (Alqatawenh, 2018). Transformational leadership is thus fundamentally a relational process of influencing and developing followers (Northouse, 2001) and has been linked to improved organizational outcomes by fostering trust, valuing employee contribution, and enabling organizational growth (Nguyen et al., 2017; Busari et al., 2019).

Employer Branding and Talent Management

Employer branding functions as an organization's primary mechanism for signalling its value proposition to prospective and current employees, drawing talent while distinguishing the firm from competitors (Gunesh &

Maheshwari, 2019). As skill shortages intensify, firms increasingly rely on employer branding to project a future-oriented image capable of attracting candidates with the required competencies (Malik, 2019; Ekhsan et al., 2021). Each of the six employer branding dimensions considered in this study has independently been linked to favourable talent management outcomes: economic value predicts attraction and retention through compensation and job security (Wallace et al., 2014; Reis & Braga, 2016); social value fosters attraction through a collegial climate (R. Sharma et al., 2019; Dabirian et al., 2019); development value drives retention through career-advancement opportunity (Hadi & Ahmed, 2018; Reis & Lacombe, 2016); application value predicts pursuit intentions where employees can apply their expertise (R. Sharma et al., 2019; Okafor, 2015); interest value attracts talent seeking creative, innovative work (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Brune, 2019); and work-life balance has emerged as an increasingly salient driver of loyalty and retention, particularly among younger cohorts (Kaiser & Regjepaj, 2019; Kumar & Velmurugan, 2018). Taken together, this literature supports the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a positive significant relationship between employer branding and talent management.

H1a–H1f: Each employer branding dimension: economic, social, development, application, interest value, and work-life balance, respectively is positively related to talent management.

Employer Branding and Transformational Leadership

A smaller but growing literature connects employer branding directly to leadership style. Maurya and Agarwal (2015) found transformational leadership strongly and positively correlated with internal employer branding, while Sahu, Pathardikar, and Kumar (2018) positioned employer branding as an intermediary between transformational leadership behaviour and employees' psychological attachment. Leadership has similarly been described as shaping the organizational culture that underlies a credible employer brand (Amin et al., 2021), with several studies reporting that employer branding attributes such as remuneration strategy and perceived organizational support are more strongly retained when reinforced by transformational leadership (Matongolo et al., 2018; Hanif & Qureshi, 2020). This supports:

H2: There is a positive significant relationship between employer branding and transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership and Talent Management

Leadership has consistently been identified as a determinant of talent management effectiveness. Abdulla and Hammadi (2020) found a considerable influence of leadership on talent management and retention among education-sector employees in Abu Dhabi, while Al-Azzam et al. (2016) reported a mutually reinforcing relationship in which effective talent management supports leadership development and vice versa. Several sector-specific studies reinforce this pattern, from banking (Mir, Khan, & Abbas, 2020) to small and medium enterprises (Onyango, 2015) and the public sector (Wahba, 2016), consistently finding transformational leadership behaviours associated with improved talent retention and management outcomes. This supports:

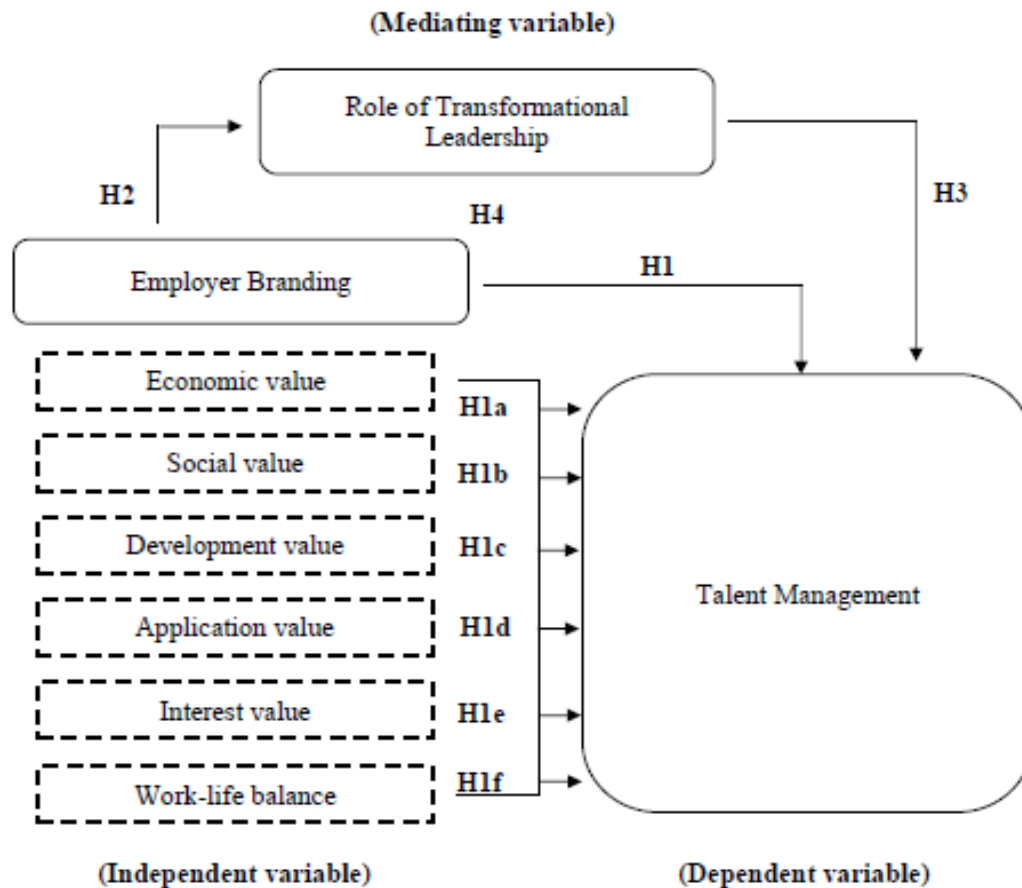
H3: There is a positive significant relationship between transformational leadership and talent management.

The Mediating Role of Transformational Leadership

Beyond these direct relationships, an emerging stream of literature suggests transformational leadership operates as the mechanism through which employer branding translates into talent management outcomes, rather than as a parallel, independent predictor. Deloitte's Talent 2020 research links effective leadership directly to employee trust, engagement, and retention, while Betchoo (2014) argues that talent management increasingly depends on leaders who can connect organizational vision to individual development. Monteiro et al. (2020) similarly note that a credible employer brand requires leadership capable of sustaining it in practice, without which the brand promise and lived employee experience diverge. This body of work suggests that employer branding alone may be insufficient to secure favourable talent outcomes unless it is enacted and reinforced through transformational leadership behaviour, motivating the mediation hypothesis:

H4: Transformational leadership mediates the relationship between employer branding and talent management.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK



Collectively, the reviewed literature positions employer branding as an independent variable, talent management as the dependent variable, and transformational leadership as a mediating variable consistent with social exchange theory's account of reciprocal organizational employee investment. This framework, and the hypotheses summarised above (H1–H4), guide the empirical model tested in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Paradigm

This study adopts a positivist research paradigm, in which hypotheses derived from theory are tested against empirical observation (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Consistent with this paradigm, a deductive approach was followed: hypotheses were developed from the literature reviewed in Section 2 and then tested against survey data. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed, in which employer branding, transformational leadership, and talent management were each measured at a single point in time (Saunders et al., 2019). The study is explanatory (causal) in nature, aiming to establish cause-and-effect relationships among the three constructs rather than merely describing them (Iacobucci & Churchill, 2018; Nunan, Malhotra, & Birks, 2020).

Population and Sample

The target population comprised middle-management employees in Malaysia's electrical and electronics (E&E) manufacturing sector, concentrated in Negeri Sembilan's manufacturing hotspots and free-trade-zone industrial areas. A stratified approach to site selection was used to reflect the geographic concentration of E&E manufacturers in the state, followed by a homogeneous purposive sampling technique to select respondents who shared the defining characteristic of direct experience within the manufacturing sector (Gentles et al., 2015;

Saunders et al., 2019). A priori power analysis using G*Power indicated a minimum sample of 98 respondents was required to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium effect at $\alpha = .05$, based on six predictors; Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table further indicated a sample of 132 for a population of 150. Of 15 manufacturing organizations approached, 9 agreed to participate, yielding a final usable sample of 113 respondents.

Measurement Instrument

Data were collected via a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising four sections. Section A measured employer branding across its six value dimensions (economic, social, application, development, interest, and work-life balance) using 29 items adapted from Berthon, Ewing, and Hah's (2005) EmpAt scale, Sahi (2019), and Tanwar and Prasad (2016), rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Section B measured transformational leadership using 21 items adapted from Bass and Avolio's (2004) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, covering idealised influence (behaviour and attributed), inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation, rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Section C measured talent management using 10 items adapted from Mahlahla (2018), rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Section D captured respondent demographic information (gender, age, education level, tenure, and employment category).

Pilot Study and Reliability

Prior to full deployment, the instrument was reviewed by three subject-matter experts for content and grammatical accuracy and pre-tested with 10 academicians, before a pilot test was administered to 30 respondents which is consistent with recommended minimum pilot sample sizes for large surveys (Whitehead et al., 2016). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 considered acceptable (Taber, 2018; Sekaran & Bougie, 2019). As Table 1 shows, all three constructs exceeded this threshold by a wide margin, supporting the reliability of the instrument for the full-scale survey.

Table 1. Pilot-test reliability statistics (N = 30)

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Employer branding	29	0.942
Talent management	10	0.947
Transformational leadership	21	0.953
Overall instrument	60	0.972

Content, construct, and criterion validity were considered in instrument design following Heale and Twycross (2015), and all items were adapted from previously validated scales to support construct equivalence with prior research.

Data Collection Procedure

Following pilot testing, the finalised questionnaire was distributed to middle-management employees across the nine participating organizations. Data collection relied on primary data gathered directly through the survey instrument, supplemented by secondary data (industry reports, government statistics) used to contextualise the study's background and problem statement. Completed responses were screened for completeness before being entered into IBM SPSS (Version 23) for analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analysed in SPSS using a sequence of statistical techniques appropriate to the study's hypotheses. Pearson correlation was used to assess the strength and direction of the bivariate relationships among employer branding, transformational leadership, and talent management (Field, 2009). Multiple regression analysis was then used to test the direct relationships specified in H1, H1a–H1f, H2, and H3, estimating the individual contribution of each employer branding dimension, and of transformational leadership, to talent management (Field, 2009). Finally, the Sobel (1982) test was used to test H4, examining whether the inclusion of

transformational leadership as a mediator significantly reduced the direct effect of employer branding on talent management (Preacher et al., 2020) that is, whether the relationship between employer branding and talent management operates, at least in part, indirectly through transformational leadership.

RELIABILITY ANALYSIS AND VALIDITY TEST

Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the measurement instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha across the full sample (N = 113). Overall, the 58-item instrument returned a Cronbach's alpha of .952, well above the .70 threshold conventionally regarded as acceptable (George & Mallery, 2003; Taber, 2018), indicating strong internal consistency across the instrument. Table 2 reports the reliability coefficient for each construct individually.

Table 2. Reliability statistics by construct (N = 113)

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Talent management	10	0.832
Transformational leadership	19	0.919
Economic value	5	0.693
Social value	5	0.793
Development value	5	0.691
Application value	5	0.724
Interest value	5	0.529
Work-life balance	4	0.741

Talent management and transformational leadership both exceeded the .70 benchmark comfortably, as did four of the six employer branding sub-dimensions. Economic value (.693) and development value (.691) fell marginally below .70 but remain within the range some scholars regard as acceptable for exploratory research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2010). Interest value returned a lower coefficient (.529), below conventional thresholds; this is acknowledged as a limitation of the interest-value sub-scale and is addressed further in the study's limitations, with a recommendation that future research revisit or refine the items used to capture this dimension.

Validity Test

Validity was addressed through three complementary approaches consistent with Heale and Twycross's (2015) framework of content, construct, and criterion validity. Content validity is the extent to which the instrument captures all relevant aspects of each construct was established through a review of the questionnaire by three subject-matter experts prior to pilot testing, together with pre-testing among 10 academicians to confirm clarity and relevance of item wording. Construct validity was supported by the use of previously validated scales for each construct: employer branding items were adapted from Berthon, Ewing, and Hah's (2005) EmpAt scale as extended by Sahi (2019) and Tanwar and Prasad (2016); transformational leadership items were adapted from Bass and Avolio's (2004) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire; and talent management items were adapted from Mahlahla (2018). Each an instrument with an established record of construct validity in prior studies. Criterion validity, concerning the degree to which the instrument's results align with other measures of the same constructs, was supported indirectly through the consistency of this study's reliability results with those reported in the original validation studies of each adapted scale. Taken together, the reliability and validity results support the appropriateness of the instrument for testing the hypothesised relationships among employer branding, transformational leadership, and talent management.

RESULT

Respondent Profile

Of 150 questionnaires distributed to middle-management employees across 15 approached E&E manufacturing organizations, 133 were returned (87.0% response rate) from 9 participating organizations. After screening for incomplete responses (5 surveys with more than 10% unanswered items) and straight-line/uniform responses (2 surveys), 113 usable responses remained (75.0% usable response rate), forming the final analytic sample.

Table 2. Respondent profile (N = 113)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	56	49.6
	Female	57	50.4
Age	31–40	30	26.5
	41–50	64	56.6
	51–60	19	16.8
Education level	Diploma	39	34.5
	Degree	67	58.3
	Postgraduate	7	0.9*
Tenure (years)	5–10	38	33.6
	11–15	60	53.1
	16–20	15	13.3
Management role	General manager	4	3.5
	Senior manager	9	8
	Manager	17	15
	Deputy manager	10	8.8
	Senior executive	14	12.4
	Executive (other)	59	52.2

*The postgraduate percentage is reproduced exactly as reported in the source data; it does not sum with the other education-level percentages to 100% and should be re-verified against the raw dataset before submission.

The sample was near-evenly split by gender, skewed toward the 41–50 age band, predominantly degree-educated, and concentrated among employees with 11–15 years of tenure and non-managerial executive-level roles and consistent with the study's focus on experienced middle-management-level employees in the E&E manufacturing sector.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics reported for this study are the frequency and percentage distributions of respondent demographic characteristics presented in Table 2 above. Construct-level descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations for employer branding, transformational leadership, and talent management) were not computed as part of the original analysis and are not reported here to avoid presenting unverified figures; researchers preparing this manuscript for submission may wish to compute these directly from the raw dataset, as many journals expect them alongside the correlation/regression results below.

Measurement Model

As this study relies on multiple regression rather than covariance- or variance-based structural equation modelling, the "measurement model" here refers to the reliability and validity of the survey instrument rather than a formal CFA measurement model.

Reliability

The internal consistency of the measurement instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha across the full sample ($N = 113$). Overall, the 58-item instrument returned a Cronbach's alpha of .952, well above the .70 threshold conventionally regarded as acceptable (George & Mallery, 2003; Taber, 2018), indicating strong internal consistency across the instrument. Table 3 reports the reliability coefficient for each construct individually.

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Validity was addressed through three complementary approaches consistent with Heale and Twycross's (2015) framework of content, construct, and criterion validity. Content validity to the extent to which the instrument captures all relevant aspects of each construct was established through a review of the questionnaire by three subject-matter experts prior to pilot testing, together with pre-testing among 10 academicians to confirm clarity and relevance of item wording. Construct validity was supported by the use of previously validated scales for each construct: employer branding items were adapted from Berthon, Ewing, and Hah's (2005) EmpAt scale as extended by Sahi (2019) and Tanwar and Prasad (2016); transformational leadership items were adapted from Bass and Avolio's (2004) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire; and talent management items were adapted from Mahlahla (2018). Each an instrument with an established record of construct validity in prior studies. Criterion validity, concerning the degree to which the instrument's results align with other measures of the same constructs, was supported indirectly through the consistency of this study's reliability results with those reported in the original validation studies of each adapted scale. No exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis (e.g., KMO/Bartlett's test) was reported in the underlying study; if the target journal expected formal construct validity evidence, this would need to be run on the raw dataset and added prior to submission.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Employer Branding and Talent Management (H1, H1a–H1f)

A simple linear regression was conducted with employer branding as the predictor and talent management as the outcome, using the forced-entry method (Field, 2009). The model was significant, $F(1, 111) = 107.14$, $p < .001$, and employer branding accounted for 49.1% of the variance in talent management ($R^2 = .491$, adjusted $R^2 = .487$, $\beta = .701$). This provides strong support for **H1**: employer branding has a positive, significant relationship with talent management.

Each of the six employer branding value dimensions was also tested individually against talent management. As Table 4 shows, all six dimensions were positive and significant predictors, supporting **H1a–H1f** in full.

Table 4. Employer branding value dimensions predicting talent management

<i>Relationship</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Economic value → TM	0.508	6.22	< .001
Social value → TM	0.429	5.01	< .001
Development value → TM	0.584	7.59	< .001
Application value → TM	0.554	7.02	< .001
Interest value → TM	0.506	6.18	< .001
Work-life balance → TM	0.621	8.35	< .001

Work-life balance ($\beta = .621$) and development value ($\beta = .584$) emerged as the strongest individual predictors of talent management, while social value ($\beta = .429$). Although still significant it showed the weakest relative association.

Employer Branding and Transformational Leadership (H2)

A second regression tested employer branding as a predictor of transformational leadership. The model was significant, $F(1, 111) = 102.10$, $p < .001$, with employer branding explaining 47.9% of the variance in transformational leadership ($R^2 = .479$, adjusted $R^2 = .474$, $\beta = .692$, unstandardized $B = 1.113$, $SE = .110$, $t = 10.10$, $p < .001$). This supports **H2**: employer branding has a positive, significant relationship with transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership and Talent Management (H3)

A third regression tested transformational leadership as a predictor of talent management. The model was significant, $F(1, 111) = 96.39$, $p < .001$, with transformational leadership explaining 46.5% of the variance in talent management ($R^2 = .465$, adjusted $R^2 = .460$, $\beta = .682$, unstandardized $B = .484$, $SE = .049$, $t = 9.82$, $p < .001$). This supports **H3**: transformational leadership has a positive, significant relationship with talent management.

Effect Sizes

Beyond statistical significance, Cohen's (1988) f^2 was computed from each model's R^2 ($f^2 = R^2 / (1 - R^2)$) to gauge the practical magnitude of each relationship, using the conventional benchmarks of .02 (small), .15 (medium), and .35 (large).

Table 5. Effect sizes for the three regression models

<i>Relationship</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>f²</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Employer branding → Talent management (H1)	0.491	0.97	Large
Employer branding → Transformational leadership (H2)	0.479	0.92	Large
Transformational leadership → Talent management (H3)	0.465	0.87	Large

All three relationships exceed Cohen's threshold for a large effect by a substantial margin, indicating that employer branding and transformational leadership each account for a practically, and not merely statistically, meaningful share of variance in their respective outcomes.

Mediation Test (H4)

To test mediation, the Sobel (1982) test was applied following the two-step procedure recommended by MacKinnon et al. (2007). Step 1 regressed transformational leadership on employer branding to obtain the unstandardized coefficient and standard error for path a ($B = 1.113$, $SE = .110$). Step 2 regressed talent

management on transformational leadership to obtain the coefficient and standard error for path b ($B = .484$, $SE = .049$). Table 6 reports the resulting mediation statistics.

Table 6. Sobel test of the mediating effect of transformational leadership

Test	Test statistic (z)	Standard error	p
Sobel test	7.068	.0762	< .001
Aroian test	7.050	.0764	< .001
Goodman test	7.086	.0760	< .001

All three variants of the mediation test showed Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman converge on a statistically significant indirect effect ($p < .001$), indicating that transformational leadership carries a significant portion of employer branding's effect on talent management. Because employer branding's direct effect on talent management (H1) also remained significant, this is consistent with partial mediation rather than full mediation. This supports **H4**: transformational leadership significantly mediates the relationship between employer branding and talent management. No moderation effects were tested in this study, as transformational leadership was theorised and modelled solely as a mediating, not moderating, variable.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 7 summarises the outcome of all hypothesis tests. All ten hypotheses (H1, H1a–H1f, H2, H3, and H4) were supported.

Table 7. Summary of hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H1	Employer branding → Talent management	Accepted
H1a–H1f	Six EB value dimensions → Talent management	Accepted
H2	Employer branding → Transformational leadership	Accepted
H3	Transformational leadership → Talent management	Accepted
H4	Transformational leadership mediates EB → TM (partial mediation)	Accepted

Collectively, these results indicate that employer branding is positively associated with talent management both directly and indirectly, with transformational leadership acting as a significant partial mediating mechanism between the two, and with all three structural relationships showing large effect sizes.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Key Findings

Taken together, the four sets of results point to a single underlying story rather than four isolated statistical outcomes: employer branding does not simply co-exist alongside good leadership as two separate levers for managing talent. It appears to operate substantially through leadership. Employer branding's large direct effect on talent management (H1) shows that how employees perceive their organization's economic, social, developmental, applied, interesting, and work-life value shapes talent outcomes on its own. But the equally

large effect of employer branding on transformational leadership (H2), combined with transformational leadership's own large effect on talent management (H3), and the significant Sobel-test mediation (H4), together indicate that a meaningful share of employer branding's influence is carried by the leadership behaviours it enables or reinforces. In practical terms, this means an organization's employer brand promise is not self-executing: it appears to require transformational -oriented managers to translate the brand's promise into the day-to-day experience that retains and develops talent. The partial (rather than full) nature of the mediation is itself meaningful. It indicates employer branding retains an effect on talent management that leadership does not fully explain, consistent with employer branding also operating through non-leadership channels such as compensation systems, HR policy, or organizational reputation.

Consistency with Prior Research

Several findings align closely with the existing literature. The positive relationship between employer branding and talent management (H1) is consistent with Brune's (2019) finding that a well-articulated employer brand image helps organizations attract and retain the talent needed to meet their goals, and with the broader employer-branding-as-competitive-advantage argument advanced by Syal (2021). Similarly, the strength of the employer branding–transformational leadership relationship (H2) echoes Maurya and Agarwal's (2015) finding of a strong correlation between transformational leadership and internal employer branding, and Hanif and Qureshi's (2020) argument that capable, collaborative leadership is central to an employer brand's credibility. The transformational leadership–talent management relationship (H3) similarly mirrors Onyango's (2015) finding of a significant positive link between leadership style and talent management in small and medium enterprises, and Irtaimah and Khaddam's (2016) broader observation that organizations with strong leadership are better positioned to retain talented employees. The mediating role of transformational leadership (H4) is consistent with the theoretical position advanced by Monteiro et al. (2020), that a credible employer brand depends on leadership capable of sustaining it in day-to-day practice.

Points of Divergence from Prior Research

Not every finding sits neatly alongside the prior literature. Social value emerged as the *weakest*, though still significant, predictor of talent management in this study ($\beta = .429$), whereas R. Sharma et al. (2019) reported social value explaining a substantially larger share of variance in general employer attractiveness and pursuit intention. A plausible explanation lies in the difference between the two studies' populations: R. Sharma et al. (2019) sampled prospective job seekers evaluating an employer from the outside, for whom a collegial, socially appealing workplace may be a more decisive attraction cue, whereas the present study surveyed *incumbent* middle managers with 5–20 years of tenure, for whom concrete developmental and work-life considerations may have come to matter more than workplace sociability once already inside the organization. This suggests employer branding's attraction-stage value dimensions and its retention-stage value dimensions may not carry identical weight a distinction the attraction-focused EmpAt literature (Berthon et al., 2005) does not explicitly draw.

A second point of divergence concerns effect size. The R^2 values obtained here (.465–.491) are considerably larger than those typically reported in the employer-branding literature for instance, Dabirian, Kietzmann, and Dibaz (2019) reported employer branding dimensions explaining a comparatively modest share of variance in similar outcomes. Two explanations are plausible. First, this study's homogeneous sample middle managers within a single, tightly defined industry (E&E manufacturing) in a single Malaysian state may share more common organizational experience than the broader, more heterogeneous samples used in prior cross-industry or cross-national studies, naturally inflating shared variance. Second, because all constructs were measured via self-report at a single point in time from the same respondents, common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) cannot be ruled out as a contributing factor, and should temper how the magnitude of these relationships as distinct from their direction and significance is interpreted.

Contextual Explanations

Several findings are best understood against the specific backdrop of Malaysia's E&E manufacturing sector.

Work-life balance's emergence as the *strongest* individual predictor of talent management ($\beta = .621$) outperforming the more established economic and developmental value dimensions is plausible in light of the sector's well-documented shift-based, production-line work environment, where the ability to achieve a sustainable balance between demanding work schedules and personal life may be comparatively scarce and therefore highly valued (Kalinska-Kula & Staniec, 2021). This also lends empirical weight to Sahi's (2019) argument for adding work-life balance as a sixth employer branding dimension beyond Berthon et al.'s (2005) original five in this manufacturing context, it was not a peripheral addition but the dominant driver. The overall strength of the employer branding–talent management relationship is also consistent with the acute talent competition described in this paper's introduction: in a sector competing regionally and internationally for a limited pool of skilled E&E talent (TalentCorp, 2023), employees' perceptions of their employer's brand may carry outsized weight precisely because credible external alternatives are visible and salient.

Theoretical Implications

These findings extend the literature in three ways. First, they extend social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) beyond its more common application to single-predictor employee-outcome relationships, showing that the reciprocity logic underlying social exchange can operate through a chain organizational investment (employer branding) → relational leadership behaviour (transformational leadership) → employee outcome (talent management) rather than a single direct exchange. Second, the findings integrate two literatures employer branding and transformational leadership that have largely developed in parallel (Lenka & Chawla, 2015; Onyango, 2015), by demonstrating empirically that leadership is not merely a parallel driver of talent outcomes alongside employer branding, but partially the mechanism through which employer branding operates. Third, the strong performance of work-life balance lends support to recent calls (Sahi, 2019; Tanwar & Prasad, 2016) to treat the classic Berthon et al. (2005) five-dimension EmpAt framework as extensible rather than fixed, particularly in production-intensive manufacturing contexts.

Unexpected Findings

Three results warrant specific attention as departures from what the guiding literature would have predicted. First, as noted above, work-life balance the newest and least established of the six employer branding dimensions in the literature outperformed the four classic EmpAt dimensions as a predictor of talent management, which was not anticipated given the larger evidence base behind economic and developmental value. Second, interest value returned a Cronbach's alpha (.529) well below conventional reliability thresholds yet still produced one of the larger standardised regression coefficients ($\beta = .506$, $t = 6.18$, $p < .001$) in the H1a–H1f set. This is a somewhat unusual pattern a sub-scale with marginal internal consistency nonetheless behaving as a robust predictor and suggests the underlying construct may be meaningful even though the specific items used to capture it may benefit from refinement in future research. Third, the uniformly large effect sizes across all three structural relationships ($f^2 = 0.87\text{--}0.97$) were larger than this body of literature would typically predict; while directionally consistent with theory, the magnitude itself should be interpreted with appropriate caution given the single-source, cross-sectional design discussed in Section 7.3.

CONCLUSIONS

Main Findings

This study set out to examine the relationship between employer branding and talent management in Malaysia's E&E manufacturing sector, and to test whether transformational leadership mediates that relationship. All ten hypotheses were supported: employer branding both as a composite construct and across each of its six value dimensions (economic, social, development, application, interest, and work-life balance) was positively and significantly related to talent management (H1, H1a–H1f); employer branding was positively related to transformational leadership (H2); transformational leadership was positively related to talent management (H3); and transformational leadership partially mediated the relationship between employer branding and talent management (H4). Work-life balance emerged as the strongest individual predictor of talent management, ahead of the more established economic and developmental value dimensions, while social value was the weakest, though still significant, predictor.

Research Contribution

This study contributes an integrated empirical test of a relationship that the literature had, until now, largely examined in fragments: employer branding's link to talent management, and leadership's link to talent management, have each been studied extensively, but rarely within a single model that positions leadership as the mechanism connecting the two. By testing all six employer branding value dimensions simultaneously against talent management and layering transformational leadership into the model as a mediator, this study offers a more complete account of how employer branding translates into talent outcomes than either literature offers alone or does so within an emerging-economy manufacturing context that remains underrepresented in the predominantly Western, services-sector employer branding literature.

Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, the findings extend social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) from a single-exchange framework to a chained one, in which organizational investment (employer branding) elicits reciprocal engagement partly by shaping leadership behaviour (transformational leadership), which in turn elicits the ultimate employee response (talent management). The findings also bridge the employer branding and transformational leadership literatures, which have largely developed on separate tracks, and lend empirical support to treating work-life balance as a substantive sixth employer branding dimension in manufacturing contexts, rather than a peripheral addition to Berthon et al.'s (2005) original five-dimension framework.

Practical Significance

For E&E manufacturing organizations, the findings suggest that employer branding investments are unlikely to realise their full potential in isolation. Because a meaningful share of employer branding's effect on talent management operates through transformational leadership, organizations seeking to strengthen talent attraction, development, and retention should pair employer branding initiatives with deliberate investment in developing transformational-oriented managers leaders who can model, inspire, and individually support the workforce in ways that make the employer brand's promise tangible day to day. The strength of the work-life balance dimension further suggests that, in this sector's shift-based production environment, initiatives that visibly support employees' ability to balance work and personal life may yield disproportionate returns relative to other, more traditionally emphasised levers such as compensation alone.

Final Conclusion

In sum, this study demonstrates that employer branding and talent management are strongly and positively related in Malaysia's E&E manufacturing sector, and that this relationship is only partly a direct one a substantial part of it runs through the transformational leadership that employer branding helps to cultivate. Manufacturing firms competing for scarce technical and managerial talent are therefore best served not by treating employer branding and leadership development as separate initiatives, but by recognising them as interlocking components of a single talent management strategy.

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