THE CONSUMERS PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYER AND SERVICE BRAND EQUITY'S: THE EXPLORATORY AND CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS

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Abstract. While the traditional components of employer brand equity are applied in the context of an organization's employees, this study sought to assess a hitherto unexplored context – the extent to which employer brand equity impacts on consumers of an organization's service brand rather than the target audience. The two research objectives were: 1) to identify the specific dimensions of both employer and perceived service brand equities 2) to assess the relationship between them and consumer behavioral intentions. The study was based on quantitative data of 526 respondents, using both Exploratory (EFA), Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM). The findings confirmed the 3 (employer brand image, reputation, and awareness) and 4 (service brand image, perceived quality, service brand awareness, brand loyalty) factors of employer and service brand equities respectively. The study revealed the employer brand equity significant relationship with service brand equity, but the lack of direct effect on consumers' behavioral intentions. The research is novel as it assesses the employer brand equity's impact not only on the service brand's overall perceived equity, but also on consumers' behavioral intentions, by examining the impact on two different groups (existing and potential service brand consumers).

1. Introduction

Customer decisions when choosing services depends on the equity created by the service brand itself (its strength), but the concept of the brand equity is more often investigated in product categories, and services use elements of the product brand equity, which shows the relevance of the analysis of the service brand equity. A strong brand is regarded as an important component in a service provider's effort to differentiate itself from competitors. (Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014). Service business aims at building loyalty, trust, a positive image, and experience; however, the question arises as to whether the consumer's opinion about the service brand will be affected by the positive or negative associations of the employer brand of that service company and other components of the employer brand equity? From what elements these equity's perception consists of?

The employer brand equity has been examined in the following aspects: the bond between values and organizational attractiveness (Jiang & Iles, 2011); the recruitment brand equity and its impact on job pursuit intentions (Collins & Martinez-Moreno, 2022); the employer brand awareness, image and reputation in the recruitment process and its relationship with competitive advantage (Yu & Cabel, 2012); impact of the elements of the employer

brand equity on attracting prospective employees (Collins & Kanar, 2013); the measurement of employer branding (Shrivastava & Shukla, 2023); the employer branding value chain where is stressed not only two target employer branding groups (existing and potential employees) but also the company and the consumers of its brands that may be affected (Theurer et al., 2018). It can be stated that the employer brand equity is usually examined from the standpoint of employees in terms of their attraction and retention; however, there is a lack of insights into how it interacts with the service brand equity, what impact it has not only on employees but also on the consumer perceived service brand equity, consumers' purchase and repurchase intentions, and their willingness to pay more.

Thus, this research contributes to consumer perceptions and brand equity theory in the following ways: conceptual refinement of components of the employer brand equity, their empirical substantiation (as equity dimensions); identification of the relations between the employer brand equity and consumer perceived service brand equity; the assessment whether any and what relationship exists between the employer brand equity and constructs that reflect consumer behaviour (brand attitude, purchase intention, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more); the assessment of the consumer experience with the service brand as a moderator between the employer brand equity and the consumer perceived service brand equity.

The aim of the paper is to investigate the influence of the employer brand equity on the consumer perceived service brand equity and behavioral intentions. *The object* – the influence of the employer brand equity on the consumer perceived service brand equity and behavioral intentions. Research *objectives* are 1) to identify the specific dimensions of both employer and perceived service brand equities 2) to assess the relationship between them and consumer behavioral intentions.

The structure of the paper. The Literature Review section aims to reveal the theoretical and empirical characteristics of employer and service brand equity, also identifies the contributions and limitations of the previous studies. The Research Methodology section describes research design, data collection and analysis (both Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)). The section Results introduces the study findings and analyzes them in relation to the current literature.

2. Literature review

2.1. Employer and service brand equities

The concept of employer brand equity is derived from the concept of brand equity, only in this case, it is existing and potential employees that are identified as the customers of this brand, therefore target groups, the creation process of equity and tools differ. It is critical to differentiate the employer brand and the employer branding process (Theurer et al., 2018). The employer brand is understood as the employer value proposition, and the employer branding process is aimed at creating an identifiable and unique identity of the employer (Edwards, 2010). The employer brand also extends branding theory and research by attempting to communicate information about the firm as a desirable workplace to new and existing employees through the creation of persuasive and remarkable employee value propositions (Jiang & Iles, 2011). Joglekar and Tan (2022) defined it as employer brand perceptions. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, p. 504) defined the employer brand equity as "the effect of brand knowledge on potential and existing employees of the firm…, the desired outcome of employ-

er branding activities". Collins and Kanar (2013, p. 288) described the employer brand equity as "the impact of a current or potential future employee's employer brand perception on his or her behaviors, emotions, and associations related to employment decisions at a particular organization". All employer brand data is summarized under the construct of employer brand knowledge, which consists of the employer familiarity, image, and reputation, and "the added value of favorable employee response to employer knowledge is generally expressed as 'employer brand equity" (Theurer et al., 2018). *Thus, employer brand equity can be understood as all knowledge and perceptions about the employer that create in the minds of potential and existing employees a convincing and exceptional value of working in that organization. It connects to the consumer perception part of the idea of brand equity in relation to choice-making, except the understanding is tied to the employer rather than the product or service.*

The service brand differs from the consumer product brand (Chang & Ma, 2015), and features of the service management theory, such as intangibility, heterogeneity and other features of services, complicate service branding compared to product branding, which results in the belief that consumer evaluation of service brands may differ from physical product brands in both kind and degree (Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014).

Issues related to service brands are different from issues concerning product brands as they involve longer-term, complex interactions in which many people participate, and therefore, service brands are about people (Rosethorn, 2016); the examined models of the service brand equity highlight the importance of the human component in the creation of the service brand equity, and models of the creation of the service brand equity highlight the number of different elements of this equity creation. The predominant constructs are largely based on Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) insights into brand equity from the consumer perspective. Brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand image are important and the most common elements of service brand equity in service sector research e.g., banking (Pinar et al., 2016), telecommunications (Chang & Liu, 2009), hotel services (Liu et al., 2017).

2.2. Overview of the studies and hypotheses

The analysis of scientific sources shows that research on the employer brand equity is dominated by studies of individual elements in questions relating to aspects of the corporate brand: corporate identification and brand citizenship behavior (Hoppe, 2018), evaluation of corporate reputation combining consumer and job seeker identities (Puncheva-Michelotti et al., 2018), and relationships between the corporate brand and the employer brand (Banerjee et al., 2020). It should be noted that there are limited amount of studies examining what elements constitute the employer brand equity. Most studies to date have focused on the role of the employer brand in employee attraction (Bareket-Bojmel & Shuv-Ami, 2019), and the focus has mostly been on only one (mostly attractiveness) or several (image and reputation) elements of the employer brand equity. Grigore et al. (2023) modified employer attractiveness scale and found that it predicts positive work outcomes (job satisfaction, intent to apply). However, employer brand equity is built by combining these elements – image, reputation, awareness, attractiveness, and associations – and such a wider diversification makes it possible to get to know which elements are more important and should be most emphasized when creating the employer brand equity externally. Because this idea of employer brand equity is founded on consumer brand equity models from the consumer perspective and equity is defined as the totality of consumer perceptions, the employer brand equity consists not of one, but of several constructs. The only study that examined the organizational brand equity

perceived by the existing employees as the sum of individual elements was carried out by Bareket-Bojmel and Shuv-Ami (2019), but in the view of the authors of this research, many questions on the used scale are related to the overall evaluation of the organization and the evaluation of the internal audience (existing employees), so it is therefore not appropriate to be used to evaluate the employer brand equity perceived by external audiences.

In the absence of research examining the effect of employer brand equity on consumer behavioral intentions, the principle of the concept of brand equity from the consumer perspective which states that the perceived brand equity determines the consumer decisions in relation to the brand, can also be applied when discussing such impact of the employer brand equity on the perceived service brand equity. Continuous purchase intention and price premium are examples of consumer behavioral consequences (Saffer et al., 2023). Oliveira et al. (2023) identified a holistic approach to assess brand equity and proposed it to be further explored in future research. From a holistic point of view, all three brands, divided into product, employer, and corporate levels, may influence the job seeker's perception of a potential employer (Gupta & Saini, 2020); thus, by analogy, the employer brand equity can affect the perception of an existing and potential consumer of the service brand, his/her purchase/repurchase intention, and his/her willingness to pay, just as the brand equity itself affects a potential employee intention to apply or, in terms of product brands, a consumer purchase/repurchase intention and willingness to pay. Also, based on the theories of information integration and signaling, the brand attitude may change depending on the previous assessment of the brand, new information, and therefore it is assumed that the evaluation of the relationship between the brands (related to one organization – employer brand and service brand), the perception of their equity will also have a spillover effect and impact on the perceived service brand equity. Based on the studies analyzed, which suggest that brand equity is important for predicting consumer behavioral intentions (purchase/repurchase intentions and willingness to pay), a parallel assumption is made that, through a spillover effect on the perceived service brand equity, the employer brand equity will also have the relationship with the constructs of the behavioral intentions of its consumers (potential and existing). Thus, the following hypotheses were formulated on the basis of research results analogous to and close to the problem area:

H1: The employer brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with the perceived service brand equity.

H2: The employer brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with the willingness of consumers (existing and potential) to pay for a service brand.

H3: The employer brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with service brand attitude.

H4: The consumer service brand experience moderates the relationship between the employer brand equity and the perceived service brand equity.

H5: The consumer service brand experience moderates the relationship between the employer brand equity and the service brand attitude.

H6: The employer brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with the willingness of an existing consumer to pay for the service brand.

H7: The employer brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with the intention of an existing consumer to repurchase the service brand.

H8: The employer brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with the willingness of a potential consumer to pay for a service brand.

H9: The employer brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with the intention of a potential consumer to purchase the service brand.

H10: The perceived service brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with the willingness of consumers (existing (a) and potential (b) to pay for a service brand.

H11: The perceived service brand equity has a statistically significant positive relationship with the intention of consumers (existing (a) and potential (b) to purchase (repurchase) the service brand.

H12: The service brand attitude has a statistically significant positive relationship with the perceived service brand equity.

H13: The service brand attitude has a statistically significant positive relationship with the willingness of consumers (existing (a) and potential (b) to pay for a service brand.

H14: The service brand attitude has a statistically significant positive relationship with the intention of (existing (a) and potential (b) to purchase (repurchase) the service brand.

In summary, there is a lack of research that would show what reflects the external value of the employer brand, what elements create it, so this study will allow to evaluate elements that reflect employer brand equity and its impact for service brand equity and behavioral consumer intentions. The dimensions are viewed as reflective, since brand equities are evaluated analogously from the dimensions of the consumer perspective, which reflect that value to the consumer (Pappu et al., 2007; Spry et al., 2011).

3. Research methodology

3.1. Data collection and scale development

In 2020, the investigation was carried out by interviewing both prospective and current consumers of the chosen service brands in Lithuania (rewarded as "Top Employer 2018" and "Most Desirable Employer 2018"), utilizing the market research firm's internet-based consumer panel regarding the data would be representative and reflecting the population of Lithuania (using quotas). The responses of 526 respondents remained suitable for analysis. The resulting data was processed by IBM SPSS23 and IBM SPSS AMOS23.

Data collection and research variables (scales). A standardized survey prepared on the basis of scales approved by researchers was used. It was adapted on the basis of construct scales of the employer and product/service brand equities, consumer behavioral intentions used in the analyzed studies (Table 1).

Table 1. Items adapted for the proposed model (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

Construct	References
1. Employer brand image (EBI)	Collins (2007) Banerjee et al. (2020) Gupta and Saini (2020) Kashive and Khana (2017)
2. Employer attractiveness (EA)	Highhouse et al. (2003) Banerjee et al. (2020) Gupta and Saini (2020)
3. Employer brand associations (EBA)	Alshathry (2015)

End of Table 1

Construct	References
4. Employer brand awareness (EBAw)	Collins (2007) Banerjee et al. (2020) Gupta and Saini (2020) Kashive and Khana (2017)
5. Employer reputation (ER)	Collins (2007)
6. Perceived quality (PQ)	Chang and Liu (2009) Pinar et al. (2016)
7. Service brand image (SBI)	Pinar et al. (2016)
8. Brand loyalty (BL)	Chang and Liu (2009) Pinar et al. (2016)
9. Service Brand awareness (SBAw)	Liu et al. (2017) Yoo et al. (2000)
10. Repurchase intention (RI)	Chai et al. (2015)
11. Purchase intention (PI)	Yoo and Donthu (2001)
12. Willingness to pay (WP)	Park and Kim (2014) Torres and Augusto (2019)
13. Brand attitude (BA)	Chang and Liu (2009)

3.2. Data analysis

3.2.1. Exploratory factor analysis

The data were appropriate for this factor evaluation since the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) threshold was 0.964 and 0.958, respectively (more than 0.9, indicating that the data are perfect for factor analysis (Čekanavičius & Murauskas, 2002), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p = .000$, $p < .05$).

In EFA, the method of principal axis factoring was chosen as one of the most used methods (De Winter & Dodou, 2012), as well as the aim was to have it reflect latent factors.

An obtained preliminary results of the EFA of the Employer Brand Equity (EBE) variables indicated 5 constructs explaining 70.64% of the dispersion of data, but after estimating the values of the communalities of the variables, it was found that the variable Ebat2 = .248 did not exceed the 0.4 threshold (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Gaskin, 2014); also, in the matrix of inverted factor weights, it was observed that the variable EBat1 was assigned to several factors (.414 and .335) and the difference between the weights was less than 0.2 (Gaskin, 2014). Also, other variables Ebat3 and Ebat4 were lower than 0.4 threshold (Reio & Shuck, 2015) as well as the variables EBas1 = −0.361, Ebas2 = .325 and −.379 and Ebas3 = .312 and −.461, and the latter variables were also assigned to several factors. All this indicated potential problems in further CFA and possible elimination of these variables. The assumption was confirmed by CFA when the evaluation of 5 constructs showed that not all them met the conditions of discriminant validity; therefore, variables that were allocated to multiple constructs or had a value less than 0.4 were excluded from the repeated factor analysis. As a result, factors relating to employer attractiveness and associations were omitted while just three constructs of employer brand

equity (image, awareness, and reputation) were considered. Also as most commonly used in scientific research, they were also used in further analysis (Collins, 2007; Banerjee et al., 2020; Kashive & Khana, 2017). After the above corrections 3 constructs were identified, which explain 70.99% of the dispersion and the variables obtained in the matrix of the model already belong to only one construct (Table 2). Also, the Cronbach's alpha for each construct exceeded 0.7, which indicates useful internal consistency (Aiken, 2002, as cited in Pakalniškienė, 2012).

Table 2. Matrix of the model of the constructs of the EBE (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

Cronbach's alpha	Constructs of the EBE:		
	Image	Awareness	Reputation
	.945	.836	.936
ER1			−.678
ER2			−.971
ER3			−.885
ER4			−.731
EBAw1		.654	
EBAw2		.675	
EBAw3		.835	
EBI1	.707		
EBI2	.793		
EBI3	.766		
EBI4	.928		
EBI5	.802		
EBI6	.817		
EBI7	.840		
EBI8	.774		

Note: Extraction method: Principal axis factoring. Rotation method: Direct oblimin.

The EFA of the constructs of the perceived Service Brand Equity (SBE) and related constructs such as willingness to pay and service brand attitude – revealed that the 6 identified factors explained 69.28% of the dispersion of data (Table 3). However, the communality of the variable SBAw2 was .246 < 0.4 and the exclusion of this variable from the factor weight matrix left other variables that did not exceed this limit of 0.4 (SBA3 = .339) and can be considered insignificant or were assigned to several constructs (SBI5 = .420 and 0.329, SBL3 = .303 and .328) and were therefore omitted from the model. Following the removal of the required variables, the dispersion of data increased to 72.4%.

The resulting matrix of the model (Table 3) shows the variables of all the identified constructs already belong to only one construct. All the weights of these variables exceed 0.4, also Cronbach's alpha is higher than 0.7 except for the service brand awareness (Cronbach's α = .681), but it is also suitable because it exceeds 0.6 (Pakalniškienė, 2012); therefore, it can be concluded that the 4 constructs that reflect the service brand equity are related to the variables that describe them.

Table 3. Matrix of the model of the constructs of the perceived SBE (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

Cronbach's alpha	Perceived SBE elements and related constructs:					
	Percei-ved quality (PQ)	Service brand loyalty (BL)	Service brand attitude (SBA)	Service brand image (SBI)	Willingness to pay (WP)	Service brand awareness (SBAw)
	.955	.759	.809	.948	.897	.681
SBA2			.634			
SBA4			.780			
SBA5			.720			
SBI1				−.722		
SBI2				−.911		
SBI3				−.914		
SBI4				−.897		
SBI5				−.726		
BL1		.604				
BL2		.502				
BL4		.656				
PQ1	.739					
PQ2	.831					
PQ3	.809					
PQ4	.863					
PQ5	.845					
PQ6	.911					
SBAw1						.551
SBAw3						.733
WP1					−.894	
WP2					−.915	

Note: Extraction method: Principal axis factoring. Rotation method: Direct oblimin.

3.2.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

After the EFA, the CFA was carried out with the identified constructs that were obtained (Figure 1).

The general CFA of the model (Figure 1) shows the strongest correlation is between the employer brand equity (EBE) $r = 0.77$, and the weakest correlation is between EBE and SBA – $r = 0.42$. It can also be seen that the perceived service brand equity (SBE) has a stronger relationship with the willingness to pay (WP) ($r = 0.66$) than with the service brand attitude (SBA) ($r = 0.62$). All relationships of this overall confirmatory factor model are statistically significant, and the main model fit indices and the validity and reliability of the constructs are shown in Table 4.

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of the construct of the employer brand equity is more than 0.5, and the Composite Reliability (CR) is more than 0.7. The construct of the
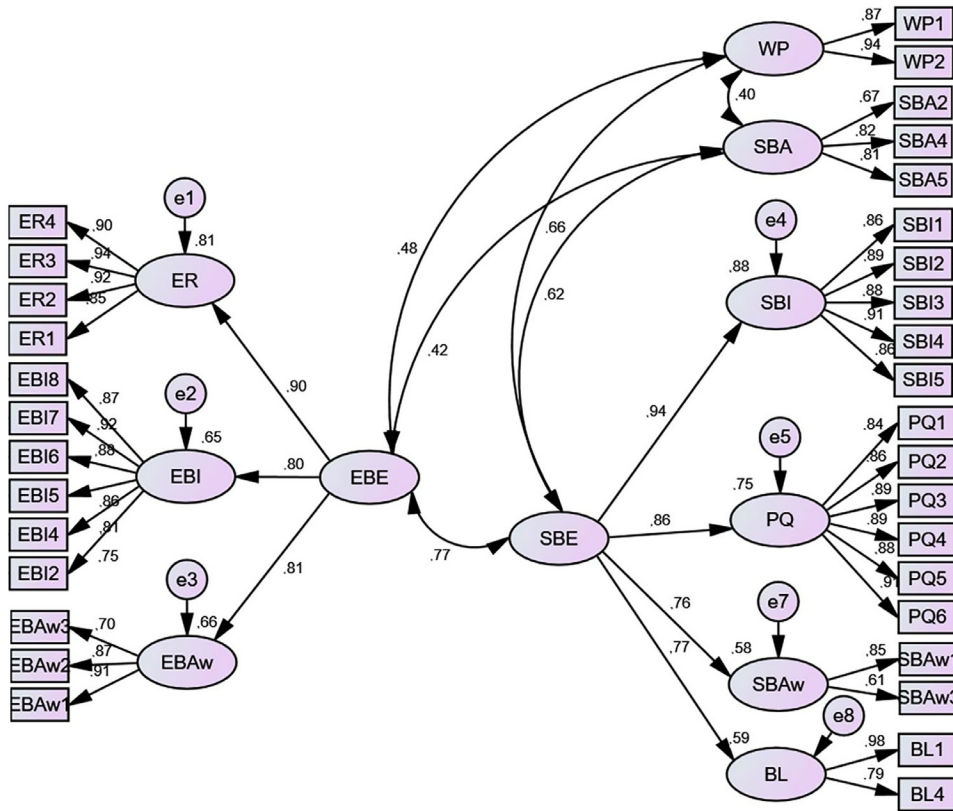
Figure 1. CFA of the EBE and the perceived SBE (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

Table 4. Convergent and discriminant validity (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

	CR	AVE	EBE	WP	SBA	SBE
EBE	.892	.734	0.857			
WP	.899	.818	.480***	.904		
SBA	.814	.595	.408***	.397***	.771	
SBE	.902	.699	.765***	.662***	.624***	.836
Boundaries of model fit indices			Index value obtained			
X², p-value > .05, DF			X² = 1157.713, p = .00, DF = 474			
CMIN/DF < 5, better < 3			2.442			
CFI ≥ 0.90, better CFI ≥ 0.95			0.958			
TLI > 0.90, better TLI > 0.95			0.954			
RMSEA < 0.08			0.052			
SRMR < 0.08			0.047			

Note: *** p < 0.001.

service brand equity also meets these conditions. The correlations in the diagonal are higher than the correlation coefficients of the other constructs, which means discriminant validity of the constructs. The model fit indices also meet the specified conditions (RMSEA = 0.052; SRMR = 0.044; CFI = 0.959). This indicated that the main constructs of the evaluated overall model are reliable and can be used to test the hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic profile

The demographic distribution of the respondents reflected the population of Lithuania: most respondents, i.e., 47.9%, live in large cities, 24.3% of the respondents live in other cities, and the least, i.e., 27.8%, live in rural areas; there were more female respondents 288 (55%) than male respondents 238 (45%); and the distribution in age groups in all cases exceeded 10%, and the majority of the respondents were in the age groups of 25–64 years – a total of 76.6% of the respondents.

4.2. Structural model: goodness of fit indices and hypothesis testing

After evaluating the general CFA (both of existing and potential consumers) and conducting the analysis of SE it was revealed that not all relationships were statistically significant. The regression significance values of the obtained structural model (x^2 = 1133.50; df = 473, RMSEA = 0.052; SRMR = 0.044; CFI = 0.959) showed that there was no statistically significant impact on the willingness of potential and existing consumers of the employer brand equity to pay (WP) (standardized regression coefficient = −0.09; p < .244). *Hypothesis H2 was not confirmed.* There is also no impact of the service brand attitude on the willingness to pay (β = −0.03; p > .547).

After the elimination of statistically insignificant relationships, the model fit indices showed good suitability of the data (x^2 = 1134.812; df = 475, RMSEA = 0.051; SRMR = 0.044; CFI = 0.959); however, it should be noted that, after the elimination of the insignificant relationships, the strength of the relationship between the perceived service brand equity and the willingness to pay (WP) decreased but remained statistically significant.

The effect of the service brand equity on the willingness to pay changed by 0.09 (from β = 0.75, p < .000, to β = 0.66, p < .000), while other values remained unchanged and statistically significant. It is also apparent that the employer brand equity has a statistically significant direct effect on the service brand equity (β = 0.62, p < .000), so *H1 hypothesis was confirmed.* The service brand attitude has a statistically significant effect on the service brand equity (β = 0.36, p < .000), and the service brand equity has a strong effect on the willingness to pay (β = 0.66, p < .000). As the employer brand equity (EBE) has a statistically significant effect on the service brand attitude (SBA) (β = 0.42, p < .000), the hypothesis *H3 was confirmed.*

In order to evaluate the hypotheses about moderation (H_4, H_5), i.e., whether there are model differences between potential and existing consumers of the service brand, the multi-group moderation analysis was performed based on the chi-square difference tests of the models because they are considered more reliable than critical value difference tests (Table 5).

Taking into account differences in the degrees of freedom and statistical significance values of the models presented in Table 5, it was found that there is a statistically significant difference at the level of the model of the groups of the service brand consumers and

Table 5. Chi-square difference tests of different models (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

Model	Difference in degrees of freedom (DF)	Chi-square difference (cmin)*	P	Result
Overall (non-constructed and constructed, (structural weights))	33	79.364	.000	Significant differences
SBA→SBE	1	13.972	.000	Significant differences
SBE→WP	1	15.026	.000	Significant differences
EBE→SBA	1	1.324	.250	No significant difference
EBE→SBE	1	6.966	.008	Significant differences

Note: At a difference of 1 degree of freedom, the minimum chi-square difference must be 3.84 (when p < 0.05).

non-consumers when comparing constructed and non-constructed models (with 33 degrees of freedom and chi-square differences of 79.364, this difference was found to be statistically significant (p < .000)). This confirms the hypothesis that, depending on whether the respondent is a consumer of a particular service brand or not, it will moderate the relation among the employer brand equity and the perceived service brand equity. *Hypothesis H_4 was confirmed*. Table 6 shows the results obtained for the different groups (service brand consumers and non-consumers).

Table 6. Differences in the paths of the structural model between the groups of the service brand consumers (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

Groups	Service brand consumers (n = 276)			Potential consumers (non-consumers) of service brands (n = 250)		
Path	Standardized coefficient (β)	t-value (C.R.)	P	Standardized coefficient	t-value (C.R.)	P
EBE→SBE	0.57*	9.41	.000	0.81*	10.02	.000
EBE→SBA	0.40	5.19	.000	0.42	5.27	.000
SBA→SBE	0.42*	6.50	.000	0.18*	3.22	.001
SBE→WP	0.70*	10.60	.000	0.46*	5.792	.000

Note: *statistically significant differences between groups, see Table 6.

When evaluating which relationships are statistically significantly affected by the service brand experience, chi-square difference tests (Table 6) show that there are statistically significant differences between all relationships in Table 7 except between EBE and the SBA (see Table 5, p = .250). These results suggest that the service brand attitude (SBA) has a statistically significantly stronger effect on the perceived service brand equity (SBE) in the consumer group than in the non-consumer group (β = 0.42, p < .000 and β = 0.18, p < .001 respectively), and this equity has a statistically significantly stronger effect on the willingness to pay (WP) in consumers than non-consumers (β = 0.70, p < .000 compared to β = 0.46, p < .000).

The hypothesis about the moderation between the EBE and the SBA was not confirmed because there is no statistically significant difference between the groups when evaluating the effect of the EBE on the SBA, and the strength of the relationship between consumers and non-consumers is very similar (β = 0.40, p < .000 and β = 0.42, p < .000). *Hypothesis H_5 was*

not confirmed – the consumer experience does not moderate the strength of the impact of the employer brand equity (EBE) on the service brand attitude (SBA) between the consumers and non-consumers of the service brand. However, *hypothesis H_4 on the moderating effect was confirmed* between EBE and the SBE: the impact of the EBE on the SBE is statistically significantly stronger in the group of non-consumers (β = 0.81, p < .000) compared to the group of consumers (β = 0.57, p < .000).

4.2.1. Testing the hypotheses (the group of consumers)

A CFA using a new latent variable (repurchase intention, RI) in the consumer group yielded statistically significant relationships, good model fit indices and adequate construct reliability and validity values: the average variance (AVE) for all constructs is more than 0.5, the composite reliability (CR) is also more than 0.7, and the discriminant validity is indicated by the square root of the AVE on the diagonal, which is higher than the correlations with other constructs (Table 7).

Table 7. Convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs of EBE and perceived SBE in a consumer group (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

	CR	AVE	EBE	WP	SBA	SBE	RI
EBE	.905	.760	.872				
WP	.901	.821	.527***	.906			
SBA	.790	.560	.388***	.421***	.749		
SBE	.930	.769	.725***	.698***	.651***	.877	
RI	.957	.881	.496***	.586***	.536***	.801***	.939
Boundaries of model fit indices			Boundaries of model fit indices				
X^2, p-value > 0.05, DF			X^2 = 1009,805, p = .00, DF = 570				
CMIN/DF < 5, better < 3			1.772				
CFI ≥0.90, better CFI ≥ 0.95			0.955				
TLI > 0.90, better TLI > 0.95			0.951				
RMSEA < 0.08			0.053				
SRMR < 0.08			0.051				

Note: *** p < 0.001.

The analysis of the relationships of the group of brand consumers showed good model fit indices (X2 = 1010,630, DF = 571, CFI = 0.955; TLI = 0.951; RMSEA = 0.053, SRMR = 0.051); however, statistically insignificant relationships were recorded between the employer brand equity and the willingness to pay more (WP) (β = 0.018; p > .832), thus, *hypothesis H6 was not confirmed.* After removing statistically insignificant relationships from the initial model, the model fit indices remained good (X^2 = 1011.464, DF = 574, CFI = 0.956, TLI = 0.951, RMSEA = 0.053, SRMR = 0.051), and the obtained path coefficients showed statistically significant relationships.

In the group of consumers, the strongest effects were the effects of the perceived service brand equity (SBE) on the intention to repurchase (RI) the service brand (β = 0.943, p < 0.000) and the willingness to pay more (WP) (β = 0.703, p < .000). *Hypothesis H10 and H11 for consumers are confirmed.* In addition, there is a statistically significant link among the

employer brand equity (EBE) and intention to repurchase the service brand (RI) (β = –0.191, p < .008) – *hypothesis H7 was not confirmed* because, although there is an effect, it is different than expected, i.e., it is negative. This means that as the employer brand equity (EBE) increases, consumers' intentions to repurchase (RI) the service brand decreases. However, the employer brand equity (EBE) itself has a positive statistically significant effect on the perceived service brand equity (SBE) (β = 0.561, p < .000) as well as on the service brand attitude (SBA) (β = 0.388, p < .000), and the service brand attitude(SBA) has a positive statistically significant effect on the perceived service brand equity (SBE) (β = 0.430, p < .000) concluding the *confirmation* of hypotheis *H12* for consumers. *H13 and H14* for consumers group were not confirmed resulting the service brand attitude (SBA) has no impact for willingness to pay more(WP) (β = –0.064, p > .422) and to repurchase the service brand (RI) (β = –0.010, p >.881).

4.2.2. Testing the hypotheses (the group of potential consumers)

A CFA using a new latent variable (purchase intention (PI)) does not fully satisfied the reliability and validity conditions of the model's goodness-of-fit indices and constructs (Table 8).

Table 8. Convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs of EBE and perceived SBE in a non-consumer group (source: compiled by authors, 2023)

	CR	AVE	EBE	WP	SBA	SBE	PI
EBE	.871	.693	.832				
WP	.869	.769	.392***	.877			
SBA	.821	.607	.409***	.243***	.779		
SBE	.862	.614	.893***	.482***	.511***	.783	
PI	.790	.658	.688***	.521***	.565***	.776***	.811
Boundaries of model fit indices			Boundaries of model fit indices				
X^2, p-value> ,05, DF			X^2 = 1262,942, p = .00, DF = 541				
CMIN/DF < 5, better < 3			2,334				
CFI ≥ 0.90, better CFI ≥ 0.95			0.903				
TLI > 0.90, better TLI > 0.95			0.894				
RMSEA < 0.08			0.073				
SRMR < 0.08			0.067				

Note: *** p < .001.

Although the average variance (AVE) of all constructs was more than 0.5 and the composite reliability (CR) is more than 0.7, which satisfies the conditions for convergent validity, the condition for discriminant validity based on the Fornell and Larcker (1981) assessment method is not satisfied – the AVE of the construct's employer brand equity (EBE) is less than its correlation with the service's brand equity (SBE) (see Table 8, in italics). The perceived employer brand equity (EBE) together with perceived equity of the service brand (SBE) may have been perceived similarly by the respondents, and the correlation coefficient between these values also shows a strong correlation (r = 0.893, p < .000). Thus, additional discriminant validity check was carried out based on the Bagozzi et al. (1991) chi-squared difference test for SE models. The unconstrained model had chi square X^2 = 1199,633 with 341 degrees of freedom and the constrained model had chi square X^2 = 1205,990 with degrees of freedom

342 with difference X^2 = 6,357, DF=1 and p < 0,00, resulting a statistically significant difference between constructs and satisfaction of the DV condition.

After analyzing the relationships of the group of potential consumers of brands in order to verify the hypotheses related to potential consumers of the service brand (X^2 = 1270.754, DF = 542, CFI = 0.902; TLI = 0.893; RMSEA = 0.073, SRMR = 0.067), statistically insignificant relationships were obtained between the employer brand equity (EBE) and the willingness to pay more (WP) (β = −0.380; p > .124), the service brand attitude (SBA) and the willingness to pay (WP) (β = −0.041; p > .640), the employer brand equity (EBE) and the purchase intention (PI) (β = −0.081; p > .652). By removing one statistically insignificant path with the lowest critical value at a time, the statistical significance of the other paths did not change; thus, *H8, H9 and H13 (b) were not confirmed*.

After removing statistically insignificant relationships from the initial model of potential consumers, the path coefficients of the obtained model (X^2 = 1272.887, DF = 545, CFI = 0.902, TLI = 0.894, RMSEA = 0.073, SRMR = 0.051) indicated other statistically significant relationships. In the group of potential consumers, the strongest effect is the effect of the employer brand equity (EBE) on the perceived service brand equity (SBE) (β = 0.817, p < .000) and the effect of the perceived service brand equity (SBE) on the intention to purchase (PI) a service brand (β = 0.644, p < 0.000) and the willingness to pay (WP) (β = 0.493, p < .000). This results the *confirmation of hypothesis H10 and H11* for potential consumers. *H12 hypothesis is also confirmed* (β = 0.178, p < .000) and there is a statistically significant positive relationship between the service brand attitude (SBA) and the intention to purchase (PI) the service brand (β = 0.220, p < .000) thus *H14 is confirmed,* however, there is no such effect in the consumer group.

5. Discussion

Managerial implications. This research fills the gap in the scientific literature on the topic by revealing yet unexplored relationships between the employer brand equity and both the perceived service brand equity and the effect on consumer behavioral intentions.

According to the findings, the components of employer brand equity were confirmed as reflective dimensions of employer brand equity: employer brand image, reputation and awareness. This result is consistent with the most commonly used employer brand dimensions in previous studies from the perspective of potential and existing employees (employer brand image – Baum & Kabst, 2014; Davies et al., 2018; De Stobbeleir et al., 2018; employer awareness, image and reputation – Kashive & Khana, 2017), from a corporate brand perspective (employer brand awareness – Banerjee et al., 2020; Gupta & Saini, 2020), employer brand image – Hoppe, 2018; reputation – Puncheva-Michelotti et al., 2018), and from product brand perspectives – (HRM image – Anselmsson et al., 2016; employer brand image – Rybaczewska, 2017). Thus, these results add to brand management theory in the sense that the dimensions reflecting the equity of the employer brand in the service to groups of potential and existing consumers have been clarified.

The study found a statistically significant positive direct impact of employer brand equity on consumers' perceived service brand equity in the overall (all respondents) model, demonstrating that it is also significant in the context of service brand consumers. This confirmed the assumption that there is a spillover effect between the brands held by the organization and this effect has a significant impact on consumers' perception of the equity of the service provided.

The assessment of possible differences between the equity of a service brand to existing and potential consumers found that this effect is statistically significantly different between groups, suggesting that experience moderates the strength of the relationship: employer brand equity has a stronger positive effect in the potential consumer group, while perceived service brand equity has a stronger effect on willingness to pay more for a service brand in the existing consumer group than in the potential consumer group, and attitudes towards the service brand have a stronger effect on consumers' perceptions of the equity of a service brand.

The influence of employer brand equity on consumer behavioral intentions generated different outcomes. This equity does not have a direct effect on the willingness to pay, either in the pooled or in the individual models, unlike in the study by Anselmsson et al. (2016), which found that HRM image has a positive effect on the willingness to pay more. There is only a direct negative effect on the intention to repurchase the service brand in the group of existing consumers. This is an unexpected result, implying that an increase in the equity of the employer brand decreases the consumer's intention to repurchase the service brand. This may be the case when it isn't stressed that this equity also contributes to the equity of the service brand itself. Thus, consumers repurchase intentions decrease as less attention is perceived to be paid to improving the service brand equity, and there is a risk that the consumer feels forgotten, the focus is no longer on them.

The results are also in line with research on the direct effect of views towards a service brand on the equity of that brand (Ansary & Hashim, 2018; Kim et al., 2012), as a significant direct effect is also obtained. The fact that the effect is stronger in the consumer group may be attributed to their existing experience with service brand use.

Although previous studies have identified attitudes toward the service brand as a factor directly affecting consumers' purchase intentions (Liu et al., 2017; Spears & Singh, 2004; Torres & Augusto, 2019), repeat purchases, and willingness to pay more (Augusto & Torres, 2018), the results of this study differ. It shows that, without differentiating respondents according to their experience with the service brand, attitudes toward the service brand don't have a direct effect on consumers' behavioral intentions. When looking at the effects across groups, it ss found that attitudes towards the service brand only have a direct effect on the purchase intentions of potential consumers, while there is no such effect for existing service brand consumers. Hence, in order to influence the intentions of potential consumers, communication can go in several directions, both in terms of creating positive attitudes towards the service brand and in terms of reinforcing their perceived equity through brand image, perceived quality, and other dimensions of service brand equity.

6. Conclusions

This study reveals that employee-oriented organizational activities and equity creation can strengthen or weaken an organization's service brand. Consumers value not only the basic service brand elements, but behavioral intentions are also influenced by employer brand equity; thus, coordinated management of employer and service brand equity can increase competitive advantage. Managers should consider not only image but reputation and knowledge when planning campaigns. Evaluating employer brand equity in three components (image, awareness, and reputation) and service brand equity in four components (brand image, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and awareness) can help create effective external marketing by forming expectations for potential employees and consumers.

Limitations and future research. The study also has certain drawbacks that might be covered by future research. First, the study was only conducted in Lithuania, it's impossible to determine impact of cultural variations. Another drawback is that only brands in the business sector, notably those in the telecommunications industry, were examined; given the nature of these services, customers perceive them to be less risky. Future studies could examine the effects on the public sector and the effects of additional factors affecting consumer behavior: how employer brand equity affects perceived brand equity in different ways across the marketing mix, incorporating sociocultural, situational elements that have been studied in studies of consumer behavior. A third limitation concerns the study sample. The impact of employer brand equity is only evaluated from an external perspective, analyzing the relationship with customers who do not work for the organization in question and whose closest relatives have not worked for the companies in question. As a result, the study is unable to evaluate the impact on customers who were or had been associated with the service providers' employers. Also, quota sampling was used in the sampling procedure for Lithuania population, thus future research could use probability sampling method.

Author contributions

All authors have participated in the concept and design, analysis and interpretation of data, drafting or revising of the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

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