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Explaining a Phenomenological Model of Employer Branding in the Domestic Automotive Industry: A Qualitative Approach

ABSTRACT

In today's business environment, improving employer branding has become one of the most important determinants of success in the automotive industry. Given intensifying competition and rising customer expectations, automobile manufacturers must continuously seek approaches to enhance their employer brand. Such efforts not only contribute to the success of automotive companies but also facilitate the development of a positive and productive organizational culture. Accordingly, the present study aimed to develop a phenomenological model of employer branding with an emphasis on human capital in the domestic automotive industry. In this study, the researcher employed Van Manen's qualitative phenomenological approach. The required data were collected through an interview protocol and in-depth interviews with eight senior managers in the automotive industry who had at least five years of senior management experience, four marketing professors with recent scholarly publications in the field of employer branding, and three customers. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Ultimately, the researcher extracted 150 open codes and, based on the theoretical literature, conducted axial and selective coding. The findings were presented in the form of a model comprising six main dimensions, including organizational reputation, organizational culture, employer value proposition, methods of attracting organizational capital, and employer brand reputation, together with 24 subdimensions. The findings indicated that automobile manufacturers that focus on improving their employer brand are more likely to achieve a competitive advantage in today's highly competitive market and establish long-term relationships with their internal customers, namely organizational personnel.

Keywords: phenomenology, employer branding, human capital, domestic automotive industry, qualitative approach

Introduction

In contemporary organizations, competition is no longer confined to products, technologies, market share, or financial resources; it increasingly extends to the ability to attract, develop, engage, and retain valuable human capital. Organizations operating in knowledge-intensive, technology-oriented, and highly competitive industries are therefore required to create a distinctive identity not only for external customers but also for current and prospective employees. Within this context, employer branding has emerged as a strategic managerial concept that integrates principles from human resource management, marketing, organizational behavior, and corporate branding. Employer branding refers to the deliberate development and communication of a differentiated organizational identity that conveys why an organization is an attractive, credible, and desirable place to work. In this sense, employees and job applicants are viewed as internal and prospective customers whose perceptions of the organization influence recruitment, retention, organizational attachment, and performance outcomes. The growing academic interest in this construct has been accompanied by an expansion of employer-

branding research across industries, countries, and methodological traditions, demonstrating that employer branding has evolved from a primarily recruitment-oriented tool into a broader strategic framework for managing organizational identity, employee experience, and organizational competitiveness [1]. Recent research has further demonstrated that employer branding is closely related to organizational performance because a strong employer brand can support the acquisition and retention of capable employees, strengthen positive employee attitudes, and create conditions in which human capital can contribute more effectively to organizational objectives [2].

A fundamental feature of employer branding is that it connects the external labor-market image of an organization with the internal experiences of its employees. An employer may communicate attractive employment promises through recruitment advertisements, corporate websites, social media, public relations, or organizational reputation; however, the sustainability of the employer brand depends on whether those promises are consistent with the actual experiences of employees after recruitment. Consequently, employer branding should not be understood merely as promotional communication or a short-term recruitment campaign. Rather, it represents a multidimensional process through which organizations define, communicate, and fulfill an employer value proposition. The employer value proposition may encompass financial benefits, career advancement, learning opportunities, organizational culture, meaningful work, social relationships, leadership quality, work-life balance, recognition, innovation, corporate responsibility, and organizational prestige. Studies examining employer-branding dimensions have shown that employer attractiveness is multidimensional and that the salience of particular dimensions varies across national and cultural contexts [3]. Similarly, research on employer attractiveness has emphasized the necessity of adopting a new organizational mindset in which the employment experience is managed as a strategic value proposition rather than as a collection of isolated human resource practices [4]. Such evidence implies that employer branding requires coherence between organizational values, managerial behavior, employee expectations, and the signals communicated to the labor market.

The strategic importance of employer branding becomes particularly evident in relation to talent attraction and recruitment. Organizations increasingly compete for applicants who evaluate potential employers in much the same way that consumers evaluate brands: they compare organizational reputations, employment conditions, opportunities for development, cultural fit, and perceived credibility before deciding whether to apply. Research has demonstrated that employer branding, corporate reputation, and organizational attractiveness can collectively influence individuals' intention to apply, particularly among younger employees and members of Generation Z [5]. This issue is increasingly important because emerging generations of employees often expect organizations to provide not only competitive compensation but also development opportunities, meaningful work, flexibility, authenticity, social responsibility, technological sophistication, and a positive organizational culture. Evidence concerning Generation Z job applicants indicates that the relative importance of employer-branding dimensions differs across applicants and that organizations must therefore understand which employer attributes are given priority by their target talent segments [6]. Gamification has also been proposed as a contemporary employer-branding mechanism capable of creating more engaging recruitment experiences for Generation Z and differentiating organizations in competitive labor markets [7]. In technology-intensive sectors, the recruitment function is likewise increasingly affected by employer-brand perceptions, as potential employees interpret organizational reputation and employment-related signals when assessing career alternatives [8].

Employer branding is equally important after employees enter the organization because the strength of an employer brand depends on the extent to which employees experience the organization as credible, supportive, and consistent with the promises communicated during recruitment. A strong employer brand can contribute to employee loyalty, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, advocacy, and reduced turnover intentions. Research on talent retention has shown that employer branding can strengthen organizational advocacy, thereby enhancing employees' willingness to remain with and positively represent their organizations [9]. In addition, organizational culture and career development have been identified as important mechanisms through which employer branding contributes to employee retention [10]. These findings are important because employer branding is not sustainable when organizations succeed in attracting talent but fail to provide developmental, cultural, and relational conditions that encourage employees to stay. Employer-branding strategies must therefore extend beyond the recruitment stage and include continuous management of the employee experience. The importance of employee voice is particularly relevant in this regard. Contemporary evidence suggests that employee feedback can be systematically used to evaluate employer-brand strengths and weaknesses and to design more responsive employer-branding strategies [11]. This perspective shifts employer branding from a one-directional managerial communication process toward a more interactive process in which employees become active participants in constructing and evaluating the employer brand.

The internal credibility of employer branding is strongly influenced by organizational culture, leadership, values, and identity. Employees judge an employer not only by formal employment benefits but also by the way managers behave, decisions are made, employees are treated, and organizational values are enacted in daily practice. Accordingly, leadership is a major mechanism through which employer-brand promises become organizational reality. Research linking transformational leadership, employer branding, and employee-based brand equity indicates that leadership behaviors can reinforce the organization's brand internally and contribute to employees' identification with and support for organizational branding objectives [12]. Organizational identity likewise provides a foundation for employer-branding strategies because a coherent understanding of "who the organization is" helps shape the messages communicated to employees and job applicants [13]. The employer brand thus develops at the intersection of organizational identity and stakeholder perception: organizations attempt to define a desired employer identity, while employees and applicants interpret that identity through their direct and indirect experiences. Employer-brand credibility is consequently dependent on consistency between communicated values and observable organizational practices. When such consistency is present, employer branding can become a source of reputational advantage; when it is absent, promotional messages may be perceived as superficial or misleading.

The effectiveness of employer branding also depends on whether organizations can evaluate and refine their strategies systematically. Employer branding cannot be managed effectively solely through managerial intuition because employee and applicant perceptions are multidimensional, dynamic, and influenced by a large volume of information. Organizations therefore need diagnostic frameworks capable of identifying which attributes contribute most strongly to employer attractiveness and where discrepancies exist between the intended employer brand and stakeholder perceptions. Research on employer-branding effectiveness has emphasized the importance of assessing whether employer-branding activities actually generate the desired perceptions and behavioral responses rather than simply measuring the visibility of employer-brand communications [14]. More recent analytical approaches have extended this perspective by integrating online

employee reviews, multi-criteria evaluation, and advanced decision models to assess employer-brand dimensions systematically [15]. These developments are especially relevant in a digital environment where prospective employees can access organizational information through social media, recruitment platforms, employee-review websites, professional networks, and other online channels. Employer branding has therefore become increasingly transparent: the organization's self-presented image can be immediately compared with employee-generated information, making authenticity and consistency central determinants of employer-brand strength.

Another important development in employer branding is the increasing significance of values, sustainability, and social responsibility. Contemporary employees often evaluate organizations not only according to instrumental employment benefits but also according to whether organizational values correspond with their own ethical, social, and environmental expectations. Research has shown that green human resource management can contribute to employer branding through corporate environmental and social sustainability, suggesting that sustainability-related practices can enhance the perceived attractiveness and legitimacy of the employer [16]. Similarly, research in the fashion sector has illustrated how corporate social responsibility actions can contribute to employer-branding efforts, particularly in smaller and medium-sized enterprises seeking to establish a distinctive organizational identity [17]. Value-based employer branding has also been found to be relevant for attracting and retaining professional employees in specialized sectors, where organizational values and the perceived employment environment may strongly influence employment decisions [18]. These findings indicate that the symbolic and value-oriented dimensions of employer branding have become increasingly important and that organizations may strengthen their employer attractiveness by demonstrating credible commitments to employees, society, and broader stakeholder interests.

The relationship between employer branding, reputation, and market-oriented outcomes further indicates that the concept has implications beyond human resource management. Employees serve as organizational representatives whose behaviors, attitudes, and communications can influence customer perceptions and the broader reputation of the organization. Employer branding may therefore indirectly support customer orientation, corporate reputation, service quality, and organizational financial outcomes. Research has reported associations between employer branding, organizational reputation, social responsibility, and customer orientation, suggesting that internal employer-brand processes can contribute to external stakeholder outcomes [19]. In service-oriented sectors, employer branding has also been examined in relation to revenue generation, emphasizing the potential economic consequences of effectively managing organizational attractiveness and employee-related brand perceptions [20]. Such findings are consistent with the broader proposition that employer branding functions as a strategic organizational asset rather than merely a recruitment tool. Employees who perceive their employer positively are more likely to support organizational goals, communicate favorably about the organization, and contribute to service quality and customer experience. Consequently, investments in employer branding can potentially generate both human-resource outcomes and broader organizational performance benefits.

Despite its increasing strategic importance, employer branding is not a universal construct that can be implemented identically across all industries and institutional contexts. The relative importance of employer-brand attributes depends on organizational characteristics, labor-market conditions, occupational groups, national culture, industry structure, and employee expectations. Sector-specific research has therefore become important for understanding how employer-branding mechanisms operate under different organizational conditions. For example, studies have developed employer-brand

attractiveness models for particular organizational environments, demonstrating that context-sensitive dimensions may be necessary for explaining employee and applicant perceptions [21]. Research on employer-branding tactics likewise indicates that organizations need to identify and communicate those characteristics that genuinely enhance attractiveness to relevant employee groups rather than relying on generic employer-brand messages [22]. The growing diversity of employer-branding research also reflects an increasing recognition that sectoral and cultural differences influence the meanings employees attach to organizational reputation, development, leadership, workplace climate, and employment value. Therefore, models developed in one country or sector may not adequately explain employer branding in another context without qualitative exploration and contextual adaptation.

These contextual considerations are particularly significant in the Iranian labor market. Employer branding is becoming increasingly relevant to Iranian organizations as they confront challenges related to recruiting skilled employees, retaining capable personnel, managing employee expectations, and maintaining organizational attractiveness in a changing employment environment. The Iran Employer Branding Report has highlighted employer branding as an increasingly prominent concern for organizations seeking to understand workforce expectations and strengthen their position in the labor market [23]. At the international level, employer-branding trends similarly indicate that organizations are placing greater emphasis on employee experience, authenticity, organizational purpose, digital communication, and differentiated value propositions when competing for talent [24]. These developments suggest that Iranian organizations cannot rely exclusively on traditional recruitment methods or compensation-based employment propositions. Instead, they need integrated employer-branding strategies that consider reputation, organizational culture, leadership, learning opportunities, innovation, employee experience, and the credibility of organizational promises.

The domestic automotive industry represents a particularly important setting for examining these issues. Automotive organizations operate in a complex environment characterized by large workforces, diverse occupational groups, technological requirements, intensive interdepartmental coordination, quality pressures, competition for specialized human capital, and significant public visibility. Their employer brand can therefore be shaped simultaneously by product quality, corporate reputation, managerial behavior, organizational culture, opportunities for development, perceived job security, innovation capability, and employees' direct experiences of the workplace. In such organizations, employer branding may also influence the ability to attract engineers, technical specialists, managers, creative employees, and other scarce human resources. At the same time, employees' perceptions of the employer may affect productivity, innovation, organizational commitment, and willingness to advocate for the organization. Because automotive firms depend strongly on coordinated human capabilities and continuous improvement, a credible employer brand may contribute to both workforce stability and organizational competitiveness.

Furthermore, contemporary automotive organizations are increasingly affected by digital transformation, new forms of work, technological change, and the need for more innovative organizational cultures. These developments can alter the attributes employees associate with an attractive employer. Learning and development opportunities, technologically enabled human resource practices, flexible or hybrid forms of collaboration, creative work environments, employee participation, and support for innovation may increasingly become central components of the employer value proposition. Employer-branding research must therefore capture not only conventional recruitment and compensation-related attributes but also the lived organizational experiences through which employees interpret the organization's identity and credibility. A

phenomenological perspective is particularly valuable in this context because it emphasizes the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences rather than imposing predetermined employer-brand dimensions. Such an approach can reveal how managers, experts, and other relevant stakeholders understand employer branding within the specific institutional and organizational conditions of the domestic automotive industry.

Although the literature has produced substantial evidence regarding employer attractiveness, recruitment, retention, organizational reputation, employee advocacy, career development, sustainability, leadership, and organizational performance, an important methodological and contextual gap remains. Much of the existing research has relied on predefined quantitative constructs or has investigated employer branding within specific service, healthcare, information technology, fashion, and other sectoral contexts. Contemporary research increasingly demonstrates the need for context-sensitive employer-branding frameworks capable of integrating multiple organizational and employee perspectives rather than reducing employer branding to a limited set of promotional or recruitment practices. Moreover, the continuing evolution of the construct, reflected in recent studies of employee feedback, digital evaluation, employer-brand effectiveness, Generation Z expectations, and organizational attractiveness, indicates that employer branding should be investigated as a dynamic and experiential organizational phenomenon [6, 11, 15]. This need is particularly relevant to the domestic automotive industry, where limited qualitative evidence exists regarding how employer branding is experienced, interpreted, and structured in relation to organizational culture, human capital, reputation, creativity, innovation, and managerial practices.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to develop a phenomenological model of employer branding with an emphasis on human capital in the domestic automotive industry.

Methodology

In the present study, the researcher employed Van Manen's phenomenological approach to develop the conceptual model. The purpose of this approach is to provide comprehensive theoretical explanations of a particular phenomenon and to transform data obtained from information sources into categories and theory. In this study, an attempt was made to conduct conceptualization, data collection, and analysis in such a manner that the researcher's paradigmatic framework could be developed.

The population of the qualitative phase of this study consisted of three groups. In the qualitative phase, the participants included academic experts and marketing managers with significant scholarly contributions. Following each interview with the experts, the researcher initiated the coding process. Given that qualitative research is exploratory in nature and typically involves the participation of a relatively small number of respondents, the sampling strategy adopted in the qualitative phase of this study was snowball (chain-referral) sampling. The criterion for determining the sample size in the qualitative phase was the attainment of theoretical saturation, meaning that no new indicators or constructs emerged from the interviews conducted with members of the study population. In the present study, the researcher conducted 15 interviews to achieve theoretical saturation and ultimately extracted 150 open codes. Subsequently, axial and selective coding were conducted based on the theoretical literature. In the qualitative phase, the researcher assessed the reliability of the interviews using test–retest reliability (stability index) and the intra-subject agreement method (reproducibility index). The results indicated a test–retest reliability coefficient of 84% and an intra-subject agreement index of 77%. Given that both reliability indices

exceeded the 60% threshold, the reliability, or dependability, of the coding process was confirmed. Furthermore, validity in qualitative research, considering its naturalistic and pluralistic orientation, depends substantially on the researcher's competencies in conducting the study. Validity or credibility in the qualitative phase, particularly in qualitative interviews, concerns two fundamental issues: reality and knowledge. Accordingly, validity was examined and confirmed step by step throughout the seven proposed stages of qualitative research, including determination of the research topic, research design, interview setting and conditions, documentation of the interviews, data analysis, verification, and reporting of credibility.

Findings and Results

Phenomenological analysis was employed to examine the data obtained from the qualitative interviews. Immediately after each interview, the open-coding process was initiated, and appropriate concepts and labels were assigned to the extracted codes in order to identify the fundamental concepts and key categories of the study. The categories were formulated at a sufficient level of abstraction to enable the integration of related concepts and codes and to provide broader theoretical coverage. Through this process, more than 150 meaningful and substantive points were initially extracted from the qualitative interviews. Axial coding was subsequently conducted to establish relationships among the categories and subcategories according to their dimensions and properties. Van Manen's analytical approach was used to facilitate the interpretation of the relationships among the identified categories.

Table 1 presents the integrated results of the axial coding process. The identified concepts were organized according to six components of the paradigmatic framework, namely causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, the central phenomenon, strategies, and consequences. Each component consists of a general category and a set of related subcategories derived from the qualitative interview data.

Table 1

Categories and Subcategories of the Paradigmatic Model of Employer Branding

Paradigmatic Component	General Category	Subcategories
Causal Conditions	Employer Brand Image	Corporate outdoor advertising
		Word-of-mouth communication about the brand
		Organizational culture
		Internal organizational values
		Managerial honesty
Contextual Conditions	Learning and Development Opportunities	Diverse training programs
		In-service training courses
		Creation of a healthy competitive learning environment
Intervening Conditions	Organizational Innovation Culture	Idea-generation competitions
		Formation of project teams
		Development of incentive programs
Central Phenomenon	Employer Branding	Product quality
		Employer brand credibility
		Attraction and recruitment of qualified individuals
		Support for organizational capital
		Managerial honesty
Strategies	Encouragement of Creativity	Creativity assessment programs
		Recruitment of creative talent
		Role of senior organizational management
Consequences	Enhanced Employer Brand Reputation and Credibility	Increased employee loyalty
		Increased job satisfaction
		Increased organizational commitment
		Improved organizational performance and productivity
		Reduced organizational costs
		Enhanced positive employer brand experience

The causal conditions refer to the events and circumstances that create situations associated with a phenomenon and explain why and how individuals or groups respond in particular ways. In the present study, the causal conditions directly affecting employer branding were represented by the broader category of employer brand image. This category comprised corporate outdoor advertising, word-of-mouth communication concerning the brand, organizational culture, internal organizational values, and managerial honesty. These findings indicate that both externally communicated brand signals and internally experienced organizational characteristics contribute to the formation of the employer brand image.

The contextual conditions represent the specific characteristics of the environment in which the phenomenon occurs and provide the setting within which strategies for managing, controlling, and responding to the phenomenon are implemented. The findings identified learning and development opportunities as the principal contextual category. This category included diverse training programs, in-service training courses, and the creation of a healthy competitive learning environment. Accordingly, opportunities for employee learning and development constitute an important organizational context for the development and reinforcement of employer branding.

Intervening conditions refer to broader circumstances, including temporal, environmental, and cultural factors, that may facilitate or constrain the implementation of strategies. In the present study, organizational innovation culture emerged as the main intervening category. Its constituent subcategories included the organization of idea-generation competitions, the formation of project teams, and the development of incentive programs. These elements may facilitate the implementation of employer-branding strategies by creating an organizational environment that encourages participation, innovation, and employee initiative.

The central phenomenon constitutes the core category to which the other major categories of the paradigmatic model are related. In this study, employer branding was identified as the central phenomenon. The category was characterized by product quality, employer brand credibility, the attraction and recruitment of qualified individuals, support for organizational capital, and managerial honesty. The findings suggest that employer branding in the domestic automotive industry is a multidimensional construct that encompasses both market-related perceptions and internal human resource management practices.

The strategies represent the plans, actions, and organizational responses arising from the central phenomenon and ultimately leading to specific outcomes. The principal strategic category identified in this study was encouragement of creativity, which included creativity assessment programs, the recruitment of creative talent, and the role of senior organizational management. These findings highlight the importance of managerial support and systematic talent practices in translating employer-branding principles into organizational action.

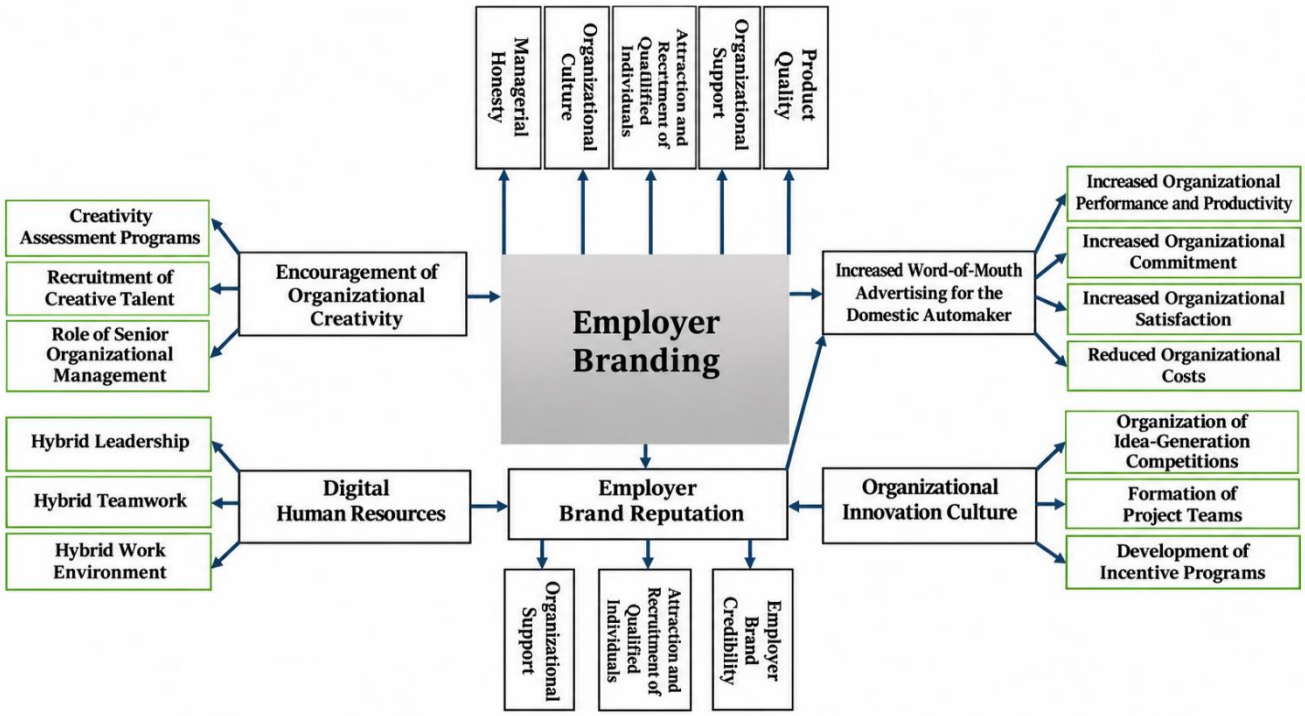
The consequences represent the outcomes resulting from the actions and interactions associated with the phenomenon. The major consequence identified in the present study was enhanced employer brand reputation and credibility. This category included increased employee loyalty, greater job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, improved organizational performance and productivity, reduced organizational costs, and a more positive employer brand experience. These outcomes demonstrate that effective employer branding may generate both attitudinal benefits for employees and operational benefits for the organization.

Selective coding involved integrating the results of the preceding coding stages, identifying the principal categories, systematically relating them to the other categories, validating the identified relationships, and further developing categories

requiring additional conceptual elaboration. The paradigmatic model of the present study was developed based on the Strauss and Corbin paradigm model. Following the logic of grounded theory, axial and selective coding were conducted to identify the key dimensions and categories and to develop the final conceptual model. Through the integration of the key points and extracted codes, a total of 152 fundamental or key concepts were ultimately identified. Based on these concepts, six principal categories constituting the research model were extracted.

Figure 1

Paradigmatic Model of Employer Branding in the Domestic Automotive Industry



Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to develop a phenomenological model of employer branding with an emphasis on human capital in the domestic automotive industry. The qualitative findings showed that employer branding is not a single promotional or recruitment-oriented activity, but rather a multidimensional organizational phenomenon formed through the interaction of causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategic actions, and organizational consequences. The final paradigmatic model identified employer brand image as a causal condition, learning and development opportunities as contextual conditions, organizational innovation culture as an intervening condition, employer branding as the central phenomenon, encouragement of creativity as a principal strategic response, and enhanced employer brand reputation and credibility as the main consequence. At the level of specific dimensions, factors such as organizational culture, internal organizational values, managerial honesty, product quality, employer brand credibility, attraction and recruitment of qualified employees, organizational support, employee learning, innovation-oriented practices, senior management involvement, job satisfaction, employee loyalty, organizational commitment, productivity, cost reduction, and positive employer brand experience emerged as important components. These findings suggest that employer branding in the

automotive sector is created through the combined effect of organizational identity, employee experience, managerial conduct, human resource practices, innovation climate, and external reputation rather than through communication activities alone.

One of the principal findings was that employer brand image functioned as a causal condition of the employer-branding phenomenon. This category incorporated corporate outdoor advertising, word-of-mouth communication about the brand, organizational culture, internal organizational values, and managerial honesty. This result indicates that the formation of an employer brand begins before the formal employment relationship and is influenced by both communicated and experienced representations of the organization. The finding is consistent with research emphasizing the relationship among employer branding, organizational reputation, and organizational attractiveness. Employer-branding signals influence how prospective employees interpret an organization and whether they regard it as a desirable workplace [5]. Similarly, employer-branding strategies have been conceptualized as mechanisms through which organizational identity is transformed into a recognizable and attractive employment image [13]. The present findings extend this perspective by showing that the credibility of such an image depends not only on formal advertising but also on informal word-of-mouth processes and the perceived integrity of managers. This is particularly important because employer-brand communication increasingly takes place in environments in which employees and applicants can compare organizational claims with employee-generated narratives and online evaluations [15]. Thus, the employer brand image of an automotive company appears to be strongest when external communication, internal organizational culture, and managerial behavior are aligned.

The identification of organizational culture and internal values within the causal structure is also consistent with previous empirical research. Employer branding has been shown to operate through cultural mechanisms because employees interpret employment promises according to the organizational environment in which those promises are enacted. Research on employee retention has demonstrated that organizational culture can mediate the relationship between employer branding and retention outcomes, emphasizing the importance of a supportive internal environment in converting employer-brand attractiveness into sustained employee attachment [10]. In the same direction, research on employer-branding dimensions has shown that the meaning and relative importance of employer attributes are culturally and contextually dependent [3]. The current study therefore supports the view that employer branding should not be limited to external communication. If the communicated employer image is inconsistent with actual internal values, managerial honesty, and employee experiences, employer-brand credibility may deteriorate. Conversely, a coherent organizational culture can make employer-brand messages more believable and reinforce both internal identification and external attractiveness.

A second important finding concerned learning and development opportunities as contextual conditions. The participants emphasized diverse training programs, in-service training courses, and the establishment of a healthy competitive learning environment. This result suggests that employer branding in the automotive industry is embedded in employees' perceptions of whether the organization invests in their professional development and provides realistic opportunities to strengthen competencies. Such a finding is compatible with studies showing that career development is closely related to employer branding and employee retention [10]. It also aligns with research proposing value-based employer branding as an important mechanism for attracting and retaining skilled professionals, particularly when employees interpret organizational investment in their development as evidence of the employer's commitment to their long-term value [18]. In a technology-intensive industry such as automotive manufacturing, this dimension is especially relevant because technological change,

digitalization, quality requirements, and evolving production systems continuously alter required competencies. Consequently, training and development become not only human resource practices but also symbolic signals that communicate how much the organization values its employees and their future careers.

The findings further indicated that organizational innovation culture acts as an intervening condition influencing the effectiveness of employer-branding processes. Idea-generation competitions, project teams, and incentive programs were identified as mechanisms through which an innovation-oriented environment could be established. This result reinforces the notion that employees are attracted not only to tangible employment benefits but also to work environments that provide opportunities for participation, creativity, autonomy, and meaningful contribution. Contemporary employer-branding trends increasingly emphasize authentic employee experience, meaningful participation, and organizational environments that support innovation and personal contribution [24]. Employer branding among younger generations may be particularly influenced by such characteristics, because emerging employees frequently evaluate employers according to developmental, participative, and experiential attributes in addition to compensation [6]. The use of gamified and participative approaches has likewise been discussed as a means of increasing engagement and employer attractiveness among Generation Z [7]. Therefore, the present study suggests that innovation culture strengthens employer branding by making the employment relationship more participative and development-oriented.

The central phenomenon identified in the model was employer branding, represented through product quality, employer brand credibility, attraction and recruitment of qualified individuals, organizational support, and managerial honesty. The inclusion of product quality is particularly noteworthy because it demonstrates the interdependence between corporate or product reputation and employment reputation. Employees may interpret the quality of the products produced by their organization as an indicator of organizational competence, prestige, stability, and professional identity. Conversely, strong employee identification and positive employer perceptions may contribute to better customer orientation and broader reputational outcomes. This interpretation is supported by research showing relationships between employer branding, organizational reputation, social responsibility, and customer orientation [19]. Employer branding has also been associated with broader organizational performance outcomes, indicating that the quality of the employment relationship may contribute to organizational effectiveness beyond recruitment alone [2]. Thus, in the automotive industry, employer branding appears to be simultaneously connected to the organization's employment identity and the reputation of the products and services through which that organization is publicly evaluated.

Employer brand credibility also emerged as a central component. Credibility is essential because applicants and employees assess whether the organization fulfills the promises contained in its employer value proposition. Previous research has highlighted the need to evaluate whether employer-branding strategies actually produce the intended perceptions and experiences rather than merely generating communication visibility [14]. This issue is increasingly important because digital information environments make discrepancies between organizational claims and employee experiences more visible. Employer reviews, digital communication, professional networks, and employee feedback can rapidly strengthen or undermine employer-brand credibility. The present study's emphasis on managerial honesty therefore has strong theoretical significance. Managerial honesty acts as a bridge between employer-brand promises and lived organizational reality. When leaders communicate transparently and behave consistently with stated organizational values, employees are more likely to perceive the employer brand as authentic. This interpretation also aligns with research connecting transformational

leadership, employer branding, and employee-based brand equity, which demonstrates the importance of leadership in translating organizational brand values into internal employee experiences [12].

Another major finding was the strategic role of encouraging organizational creativity. Creativity assessment programs, recruitment of creative talent, and the role of senior management were identified as central strategic actions. This result indicates that employer branding is not solely a communication strategy but also a capability-building process. Organizations that wish to be perceived as attractive employers must create conditions in which talented employees can contribute ideas, develop professionally, and experience managerial support. In competitive labor markets, organizations increasingly differentiate themselves by emphasizing the quality of the employment experience and the opportunities employees have to create value. Employer-branding tactics aimed at elevating organizational attractiveness are most effective when they are supported by substantive organizational practices rather than image-based claims alone [22]. Similarly, employer-branding strategies aimed at talent attraction require alignment between organizational identity and the actual experience offered to employees [13]. The present findings therefore suggest that senior managers have a particularly important role in institutionalizing creativity, allocating resources to innovative projects, rewarding new ideas, and ensuring that creative employees perceive genuine opportunities to contribute.

The findings also imply that the employer-branding model is closely connected with the ability to attract, recruit, and retain qualified human capital. This dimension is strongly supported by previous studies. Employer branding, corporate reputation, and organizational attractiveness have been found to influence intention to apply, especially among younger job seekers [5]. Employer-branding dimensions also shape how Generation Z evaluates potential employers [6]. In addition, employer branding has been linked to improved talent retention through organizational advocacy, indicating that employees who identify positively with the employer brand may be more willing to remain with and recommend the organization [9]. Research in recruitment-intensive sectors has similarly emphasized the role of employer branding in recruitment effectiveness [8]. These studies collectively support the present conclusion that employer branding provides value throughout the employment cycle, from initial attraction and recruitment to employee retention and internal advocacy.

The principal consequence identified in the model was enhanced employer brand reputation and credibility, manifested in increased employee loyalty, greater job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, improved organizational performance and productivity, reduced organizational costs, and a more positive employer-brand experience. These findings are consistent with the strategic perspective on employer branding advanced in prior research. Strong employer branding has been associated with organizational performance because it facilitates the attraction and retention of employees who are more likely to support organizational objectives [2]. Employer branding has also been linked with retention through culture and career development [10], while organizational advocacy has been identified as a mechanism through which employer branding strengthens employee retention [9]. Accordingly, employee loyalty and commitment in the present model can be interpreted as attitudinal outcomes of a positive and credible employment relationship.

The finding concerning organizational performance and productivity is also aligned with previous research suggesting that employer branding produces economic and operational benefits. A positive employer brand can reduce recruitment difficulties, improve the quality of applicants, reduce unwanted turnover, and increase employees' motivation to contribute to organizational goals. Research in the hospitality context has linked employer branding with revenue-generation considerations, highlighting its potential contribution to business performance [20]. More generally, employer branding has

been presented as a strategy capable of strengthening organizational performance through the effective management of employees and organizational reputation [2]. The reduction of organizational costs identified in the present research can therefore be understood in terms of lower recruitment and replacement costs, improved retention, reduced loss of organizational knowledge, and greater employee productivity.

The present study also supports the growing emphasis on employee experience and employee voice in contemporary employer-branding research. A positive employer brand is not produced exclusively by what organizations say about themselves, but by what employees experience and subsequently communicate to others. Research demonstrates that employee feedback can be used directly to construct and refine effective employer-branding strategies [11]. This is highly consistent with the present findings concerning positive employer-brand experience, word-of-mouth communication, employee loyalty, and organizational satisfaction. Employees who experience organizational support, credible leadership, development opportunities, and an innovative culture may become informal ambassadors for the employer brand. Their advocacy can influence the perceptions of prospective employees and reinforce external organizational reputation. In contrast, negative employee experiences may undermine formal employer-branding campaigns regardless of the resources devoted to promotional communication.

The model also demonstrates the relevance of organizational values and responsibility to employer-brand development. Although sustainability was not identified as an independent major category in the present model, the emphasis on organizational values, culture, and credibility is compatible with research showing that employees increasingly evaluate employers according to social and ethical characteristics. Green human resource management, corporate environmental sustainability, and corporate social sustainability have been linked to employer branding [16], while corporate social responsibility activities have been examined as mechanisms of employer-brand differentiation [17]. These findings reinforce the interpretation that employer branding reflects a broader organizational value system rather than an isolated human resource technique. In this respect, the internal values identified in the present study may provide the foundation upon which additional dimensions such as social responsibility, environmental responsibility, and ethical organizational behavior can be incorporated into future employer-branding initiatives.

Finally, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of the domestic automotive industry. Employer branding in this setting is shaped by the interaction of organizational reputation, managerial credibility, product quality, training and development, innovation culture, human capital practices, creativity, and employee outcomes. Iranian evidence has already demonstrated increasing organizational interest in employer branding and the need to understand workforce expectations within the national labor market [23]. Context-specific employer-branding models developed in Iranian organizations have also shown that organizational attractiveness must be interpreted according to the characteristics of the relevant sector and workforce [21]. Accordingly, the phenomenological model developed in the present study contributes to the literature by showing how employer branding can be understood as an integrated human-capital and organizational-management system in the automotive sector. Rather than treating employer branding as an isolated recruitment campaign, the model positions it as an organizational phenomenon generated through culture, values, leadership, human resource development, innovation, creativity, reputation, and employee experience.

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological design and relied on a relatively small purposively selected group of participants,

including senior automotive managers, marketing academics, and customers. Although theoretical saturation was achieved, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all automotive companies or other industrial sectors. Second, the study focused on the domestic automotive industry, and the institutional, economic, cultural, and managerial characteristics of this context may have influenced the categories that emerged. Third, the data were primarily based on participants' perceptions and retrospective accounts, which may be influenced by social desirability, selective recall, and individual interpretation. Fourth, the cross-sectional nature of the interviews did not permit examination of how employer-brand perceptions change over time. Finally, although multiple procedures were used to establish the reliability and credibility of the qualitative coding, interpretation remains partly dependent on the researchers' analytical judgments.

Future research should quantitatively validate the proposed model using larger and more diverse samples of employees, managers, job applicants, and other stakeholders in different automotive companies. Structural equation modeling could be employed to test the relationships among causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, the central phenomenon, and organizational consequences. Comparative studies could examine whether the dimensions identified in this research differ between public and private automotive firms, large and small manufacturers, automotive manufacturers and parts suppliers, or domestic and international companies. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable for evaluating changes in employer-brand perceptions following major organizational interventions or changes in labor-market conditions. Future studies could additionally investigate the moderating effects of age, generation, occupational group, managerial level, tenure, and employment type. Greater attention should also be paid to digital employer branding, employee-generated online reviews, hybrid work arrangements, sustainability, organizational justice, psychological safety, and artificial intelligence-enabled human resource practices as emerging determinants of employer attractiveness and employer-brand credibility.

Managers in the domestic automotive industry should approach employer branding as an integrated organizational strategy rather than as a recruitment or advertising activity. Organizations should first ensure consistency between the promises communicated to prospective employees and the actual experiences of existing personnel. Senior managers should strengthen transparency, managerial honesty, organizational support, and visible commitment to employee development. Human resource departments should establish systematic learning and development programs, strengthen career-development opportunities, identify and recruit creative talent, and provide incentives for idea generation and participation in project teams. Organizations should also regularly assess employee perceptions of the employer brand and use employee feedback to identify discrepancies between intended and experienced organizational values. Particular attention should be given to organizational culture, product and corporate reputation, innovation, internal communication, and positive word-of-mouth advocacy. By aligning these elements, automotive companies can strengthen employee loyalty and commitment, improve job satisfaction and productivity, reduce avoidable human resource costs, and develop a credible employer reputation capable of attracting and retaining high-quality human capital.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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