

From Leadership to Brand Equity: The Mediating Roles of Virtuousness and Online Learning Readiness in Indonesian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Amid increasing competition from foreign universities and rapid digital transformation, Indonesian higher education institutions must align leadership, organizational values, and digital readiness to strengthen internal brand equity. This study examines how Servant Leadership (SL) influences Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) through Organizational Virtuousness (OV) and Online Learning Readiness (OLR). Drawing on internal branding and broaden-and-build theories, the research tested a structural model using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with data from 84 academic and administrative staff across higher education institutes in LLDIKTI Region III. Results show that SL significantly enhances EBBE both directly and indirectly through OLR, while OV does not exhibit a significant mediating effect when readiness is included. SL also strongly predicts both OV and OLR, underscoring its central role in cultivating ethical culture and digital capability. The model explains 53.8% of the variance in EBBE. Overall, the findings highlight that leadership-driven readiness, rather than values alone, most effectively translates institutional purpose into brand-consistent employee behavior. This study contributes to leadership and internal branding literature in higher education and offers practical insights for university leaders and policymakers seeking to build capable, ethical, and competitive institutions.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Organizational Virtuousness, Online Learning Readiness, Employee-Based Brand Equity, Internal Branding, Higher Education.

ABSTRAK

Di tengah meningkatnya persaingan dengan universitas luar negeri dan pesatnya transformasi digital, perguruan tinggi di Indonesia harus mampu menyelaraskan kepemimpinan, nilai-nilai organisasi, dan kesiapan digital untuk memperkuat ekuitas merek internal. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana Servant Leadership (SL) memengaruhi Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) melalui Organizational Virtuousness (OV) dan Online Learning Readiness (OLR). Berdasarkan teori internal branding dan broaden-and-build, penelitian ini menguji model struktural menggunakan Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) dengan data dari 84 tenaga akademik dan administratif di berbagai perguruan tinggi dalam wilayah LLDIKTI Region III. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa SL secara signifikan meningkatkan EBBE, baik secara langsung maupun tidak langsung melalui OLR, sementara OV tidak menunjukkan efek mediasi yang signifikan ketika variabel kesiapan (OLR) dimasukkan. Selain itu, SL juga berpengaruh kuat terhadap OV dan OLR, yang menegaskan peran sentralnya dalam menumbuhkan budaya etis dan kemampuan digital. Model penelitian ini mampu menjelaskan 53,8% varians EBBE. Temuan penelitian ini menyoroti bahwa kesiapan yang digerakkan oleh kepemimpinan, bukan sekadar nilai-nilai organisasi, merupakan faktor yang paling efektif dalam menerjemahkan tujuan institusi menjadi perilaku karyawan yang selaras dengan merek. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi bagi literatur mengenai kepemimpinan dan internal branding di pendidikan tinggi serta menawarkan wawasan praktis bagi para pemimpin universitas dan pembuat kebijakan dalam membangun institusi yang kompeten,

beretika, dan berdaya saing tinggi.

Kata kunci: *Servant Leadership, Organizational Virtuousness, Online Learning Readiness, Employee-Based Brand Equity, Internal Branding, Higher Education.*

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INTRODUCTION

How do servant leadership and organizational virtuousness shape employees' readiness for online learning and, in turn, strengthen employee-based brand equity in universities preparing to compete with incoming foreign higher education institutions? This question has become increasingly relevant for Indonesian higher education following the government's policy reforms that allow foreign universities to operate in the country (Ministerial Regulation No. 53/2018). The inauguration of Monash University Indonesia and the encouragement of other international entrants, particularly within the Jakarta region under LLDIKTI III, have intensified competition (Azzahra, 2023; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022; PwC Indonesia, 2022; Reuters, 2020). In this changing landscape, universities must compete not only through rankings or enrollment numbers but also through the strength of the internal brand their employees embody. Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE), which reflects employees' brand knowledge, identification, and brand-consistent behaviors, plays a central role in shaping how students and external stakeholders experience institutional values (Li et al., 2022; Zhang, 2024). In higher education, EBBE has become a strategic capability that supports institutional quality, reputation, and differentiation amid increasing competition (O'Sullivan, 2024). However, empirical studies exploring EBBE within university workforces, particularly in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, remain limited.

Servant leadership (SL), a moral and people-centered leadership approach that prioritizes follower growth and well-being, has been linked to engagement, learning, and adaptability in dynamic environments (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021; Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2018; Roh, 2023; Cai et al., 2024). In academic settings, SL encourages collective learning and agility, which are essential for universities as they adapt to online and hybrid delivery models (Han et al., 2024). Complementing leadership behavior, organizational virtuousness (OV) represents shared norms of trust, compassion, integrity, forgiveness, and optimism that promote employee flourishing, ethical behavior, and performance (Gogia et al., 2024; Ho et al., 2023). Together, servant leadership and virtuous organizational climates are expected to foster Online Learning Readiness (OLR), defined as the confidence, motivation, and self-directed capability of staff to design and deliver quality online instruction.

These dynamics are particularly critical in Jakarta's universities, where competition from foreign entrants coincides with the national push for digital transformation in education. Studies of

Indonesian educators have revealed ongoing challenges in digital self-efficacy, pedagogical adaptation, and institutional support for online learning (Los, 2021; Nurhikmah et al., 2024). Previous findings also show that OLR is associated with improved learning quality, service outcomes, and institutional reputation (Duan et al., 2024; Reyes-Millán et al., 2023), reinforcing its strategic relevance for sustaining brand equity in digital higher education environments.

Although prior studies have demonstrated that servant leadership can directly enhance employee-based brand equity (e.g., Zhang & Guo, 2022) and that organizational virtuousness fosters positive employee attitudes, engagement, and well-being (Hendriks et al., 2020), few have explored how these constructs jointly shape internal brand equity. For instance, Zhang and Guo (2022) examined the link between servant leadership and EBBE. However, they omitted the role of virtuousness, leaving the combined effects of servant leadership (SL) and organizational virtuousness (OV) underexplored. Most existing studies tend to treat SL and OV as independent constructs or connect them primarily to general job outcomes rather than brand-related behaviors (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021; Eva et al., 2019). Meanwhile, research on online learning readiness (OLR) has predominantly centered on students, overlooking its potential organizational implications for employee performance and institutional branding (Los, 2021; Han et al., 2024). Furthermore, the integration of leadership, virtuous climate, and digital capability as joint predictors of EBBE remains limited, particularly within non-Western and higher education contexts. To address these gaps, this study investigates how servant leadership influences EBBE, both directly and indirectly through OV and OLR, among academic and administrative staff at Higher Education Institutes within the LLDIKTI Region III. By integrating leadership, organizational climate, and readiness capabilities within a single model, this study extends the theoretical understanding of how values and capabilities combine to drive brand-consistent employee behavior. The findings aim to contribute to leadership and internal branding literature in higher education and provide actionable insights for university leaders seeking to enhance institutional competitiveness through servant leadership development and readiness-building initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study draws upon three complementary theoretical perspectives: the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991), Brand Equity Theory (Keller, 1993), and the Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) perspective (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). The RBV asserts that organizational resources, particularly human, relational, and knowledge-based capabilities, can confer sustained competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Within higher education, leadership style, organizational climate, and employees' readiness for digital learning constitute such intangible resources that enhance institutional competitiveness. Brand Equity Theory explains how employees' brand knowledge, identification, and behavior shape internal and external brand value (Keller, 1993; He, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). From this perspective, employees are the brand's internal ambassadors who translate institutional identity into authentic stakeholder experiences. Complementing these, Positive Organizational Scholarship highlights the role of virtues, such as trust, compassion, forgiveness, and integrity, in fostering high-performing, resilient, and values-driven organizations (Cameron et al., 2011). Together, these frameworks suggest that leadership, organizational virtues, and digital readiness jointly shape employee-based brand equity (EBBE) and thereby enhance institutional differentiation.

In Indonesia's higher education landscape, particularly in the LLDIKTI III region, where competition has intensified due to the entry of foreign universities, university brand strength increasingly depends on staff's daily behaviors in delivering the student experience. EBBE reflects employees' understanding of brand values, identification with institutional purpose, and consistent brand-aligned actions (He, 2022; Zhang, 2024). Three interrelated constructs— servant leadership (SL), organizational virtuousness (OV), and online learning readiness (OLR) — offer promising levers for fostering these brand-consistent behaviors. Servant leaders emphasize humility, empathy, and stewardship, creating psychological safety and empowerment (Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2018). Organizational virtuousness captures collective norms of compassion, integrity, and optimism that strengthen trust and commitment (Ho et al., 2023; Gogia et al., 2024). Online learning readiness, in turn, embodies motivation, digital competence, and self-directed learning capability— attributes that are critical to delivering quality hybrid and online education (Los, 2021; Reyes-Millán et al., 2023; Nurhikmah et al., 2024; Duan et al., 2024). Despite their conceptual alignment, the relationships among these constructs remain underexplored in university contexts within developing economies.

Servant Leadership and Employee-Based Brand Equity

Servant leadership represents a follower-centered approach that prioritizes the growth and well-being of others, fosters empowerment, and models moral integrity (Eva et al., 2019). It has been shown to explain unique variance in employee engagement and learning beyond transformational or authentic leadership (Hoch et al., 2018). Within academic environments, servant leaders promote autonomy, inclusion, and purpose, encouraging staff to act with initiative in teaching and student service. Such environments enhance psychological meaningfulness and belonging, leading to stronger identification with the institution (Roh, 2023). When employees perceive that their leaders serve and value them, they reciprocate by enacting and reinforcing institutional values, thereby increasing EBBE (He, 2022; Yang et al., 2022; Zhang, 2024).

H1: Servant leadership positively and significantly affects employee-based brand equity.

Organizational Virtuousness and Employee-Based Brand Equity

Organizational virtuousness refers to the collective enactment of moral values such as trust, forgiveness, compassion, and integrity, which sustain employee well-being and organizational commitment (Cameron et al., 2011; Ho et al., 2023). Virtuous climates promote prosocial and discretionary behaviors, such as helping colleagues, showing empathy toward students, and maintaining fairness in decision-making, which mirror brand-consistent performance. Empirical findings indicate that OV is positively associated with organizational citizenship behaviors and performance outcomes (Gogia et al., 2024). In higher education, virtuousness manifests through ethical governance, collegial collaboration, and compassionate handling of student issues. Such climates enhance value congruence and trust, reinforcing identification with the university brand and, consequently, EBBE (He, 2022; Yang et al., 2022).

H2: Organizational virtuousness positively and significantly affects employee-based brand equity.

Online Learning Readiness and Employee-Based Brand Equity

Online learning readiness (OLR) represents employees' motivation, digital-pedagogic competence, communication efficacy, and self-directed learning capacity (Los, 2021). Studies confirm that high readiness enhances engagement, satisfaction, and learning quality (Reyes-Millán et al., 2023; Duan

et al., 2024). In Indonesia, readiness is not only an individual trait but also an outcome of institutional support and infrastructure (Nurhikmah et al., 2024). Staff who feel digitally competent and confident experience less anxiety and role ambiguity, enabling consistent and responsive performance. These behaviors strengthen institutional credibility and the perceived reliability of the university's brand. H3: Online learning readiness positively and significantly affects employee-based brand equity.

Servant Leadership and Organizational Virtuosity

Leadership profoundly shapes organizational climate. Servant leaders model fairness, humility, and compassion through daily interactions, which gradually diffuse as collective norms of virtue (Eva et al., 2019). This diffusion embeds moral and relational values—such as trust and forgiveness—within the organization's culture (Roh, 2023). In universities, servant leaders who recognize effort, promote collaboration, and share credit foster optimism and mutual respect, the hallmarks of virtuous climates (Ho et al., 2023).

H4: Servant leadership positively and significantly affects organizational virtuosity.

Servant Leadership and Online Learning Readiness

Servant leadership also enhances online learning readiness by creating psychologically safe, learning-oriented environments. Leaders who secure resources, provide training, and encourage experimentation increase staff's digital confidence and agility (Han et al., 2024). By reducing fear of failure and promoting open communication, servant leaders foster self-direction and adaptability, key components of OLR (Los, 2021; Reyes-Millán et al., 2023).

H5: Servant leadership positively and significantly affects online learning readiness.

Mediating Role of Online Learning Readiness

Servant leadership may indirectly strengthen EBBE by enhancing online learning readiness. According to the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), positive emotions generated by servant-led environments broaden employees' thought-action repertoires and build enduring personal resources such as self-efficacy and resilience. By promoting learning orientation (Han et al., 2024) and psychological safety (Roh, 2023), servant leaders indirectly cultivate readiness for online instruction and service delivery. Employees who are confident and capable in digital contexts demonstrate more consistent, student-centered behaviors, reinforcing brand trust and alignment (He, 2022; Yang et al., 2022; Zhang, 2024).

H6: Online learning readiness mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee-based brand equity.

Mediating Role of Organizational Virtuosity

A second mediating mechanism lies in organizational virtuosity. Servant leaders' other-centered values cascade through the organization, institutionalizing compassion, integrity, and trust that enhance commitment and discretionary effort (Eva et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2023). Virtuous climates encourage cooperation, service recovery, and ethical conduct, which sustain brand-consistent performance even under pressure. When employees perceive fairness and compassion within their institution, they are more likely to extend these values to students and external stakeholders, strengthening the university's brand authenticity (He, 2022; Yang et al., 2022).

H7: Organizational virtuosity mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee-based brand equity.

Conceptual Model

To better understand the relationships among the key constructs in this study, a conceptual framework is proposed in Figure 1, developed from the preceding literature. The framework explains how Servant Leadership (SL) influences Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) directly and indirectly through two intermediate mechanisms: Organizational Virtuousness (OV) and Online Learning Readiness (OLR). SL is conceptualized as the foundational driver that shapes the institution's moral climate and learning capability. By fostering compassion, integrity, and trust (OV) and strengthening employees' readiness to engage with digital and hybrid learning environments (OLR), servant leaders indirectly enhance EBBE—the degree to which employees internalize, identify with, and enact the university's brand values.

This conceptualization highlights both capability-building (via OLR) and value-based climate formation (via OV) as dual pathways linking leadership to brand outcomes. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how servant leadership translates institutional values into sustainable, brand-consistent employee behaviors, reinforcing the university's internal brand equity and competitive positioning. The framework thus provides a theoretical foundation for the empirical model tested in this study.

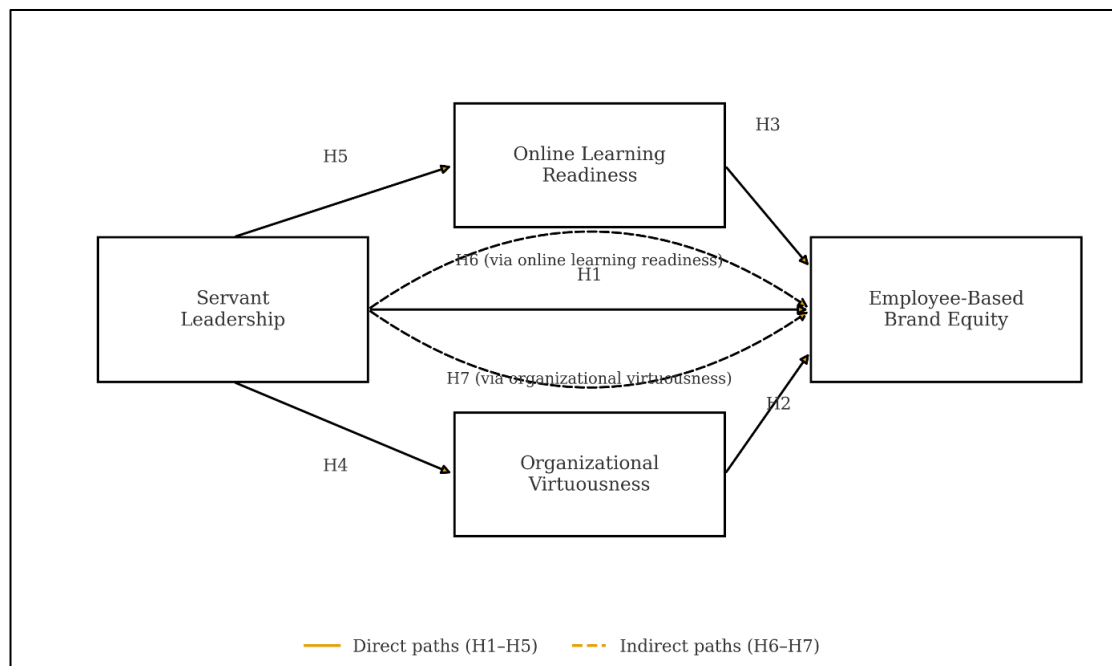


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODS

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative design using an online survey to examine the interrelationships among Servant Leadership (SL), Organizational Virtuousness (OV), Online Learning Readiness (OLR), and Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) within Indonesian higher education institutions. We employed purposive sampling to reach information-rich respondents who were directly involved in the design, delivery, or governance of online and hybrid learning within higher education institutions under LLDIKTI Region III. Invitations were circulated to the units responsible for academic and non-academic services. This approach was appropriate because the

target population is functionally defined (i.e., staff with direct exposure to online/hybrid provision) and not well captured by general frames, making probability sampling impractical for the study aims.

A total of 120 responses were initially received. Following data cleaning procedures to ensure reliability, 36 responses were excluded due to incomplete entries or low response variability (standard deviation < 0.25). The final dataset comprised 84 valid responses for analysis, yielding a 70% usable response rate. This level of participation is consistent with prior survey work in higher-education organizational research and provides sufficient statistical power for the estimated model. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents provided informed consent prior to completing the online questionnaire.

All constructs were measured using multi-item, five-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) adapted from validated instruments in prior leadership, organizational behavior, and higher education branding research. Servant Leadership (SL) was measured using five items reflecting humility, empowerment, and stewardship behaviors exhibited by supervisors (Liden et al., 2015). Organizational Virtuousness (OV) was measured using eight items derived from Cameron et al. (2004) that assess perceived institutional virtues such as integrity, compassion, forgiveness, and optimism. Online Learning Readiness (OLR) was measured using eight items adapted from Hung et al. (2010) that reflect employees' self-directedness, motivation, and technological readiness for digital learning environments. Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) was assessed using five items based on King and Grace (2010), capturing employees' perceptions of brand commitment, brand endorsement, and alignment with institutional identity. The instrument was reviewed by two academic experts in management and marketing to ensure contextual relevance and face validity before final administration.

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS version 4.0, chosen for its predictive capability and suitability for complex mediation models with relatively small samples. The analysis followed the standard two-step approach: first, assessing the measurement model to confirm reliability and validity, and second, evaluating the structural model to test hypothesized relationships. Given the study's four latent constructs comprising 26 observed indicators, the final sample of 84 valid responses comfortably exceeds the minimum recommended threshold for PLS-SEM. Following the "10- times rule" (Chin, 1998; Hair et al., 2021), the required sample size should be at least ten times the greater of (a) the maximum number of structural paths directed at any endogenous construct or (b) the maximum number of indicators used to measure any construct. In this model, the construct with the most indicators was Online Learning Readiness (OLR), comprising eight items, while the most complex endogenous construct of Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) had three incoming paths (from Servant Leadership, Organizational Virtuousness, and Online Learning Readiness). Thus, the more conservative benchmark requires at least 80 observations. The actual sample of 84 respondents, therefore, exceeds both criteria, ensuring robust statistical adequacy. A post-hoc power analysis (Wickelmaier, 2021) further confirmed that the data had statistical power above 0.95 to detect medium effect sizes at the 5% significance level, indicating that the sample is sufficient for reliable hypothesis testing.

Table 1: Respondent demographics

Demographics	Category	N	Percent
Gender	Female	48	57.14%
	Male	36	42.86%
Age	21–30	11	13.10%
	31–40	29	34.52%
	41–50	21	25.00%
	51–60	16	19.05%
	Over 60	7	8.33%
	Bachelor's degree	15	17.86%
Education	Master's degree	47	55.95%
	Doctorate (PhD/EdD)	22	26.19%
	Management	30	35.71%
Position	Faculty (lecturer/professor)	35	41.67%
	Administrative staff	13	15.48%
	Support staff	6	7.14%
	1–3 years	19	22.62%
Experience	4–6 years	9	10.71%
	7–10 years	16	19.05%
	More than 10 years	40	47.62%
	Private university	46	54.76%
Institution Type	Public university	24	28.57%
	Other	6	7.14%
	Community college	4	4.76%
Institutional Tech Readiness (1–5)	1 (Very Low)	2	2.38%
	2 (Low)	4	4.76%
	3 (Moderate)	40	47.62%
	4 (High)	32	38.10%
	5 (Very High)	6	7.14%

The respondent profile in Table 1, reflects a balanced representation of higher education personnel across the LLDIKTI III region. The majority of participants were mid-career professionals aged 31–50 years, with over half holding postgraduate qualifications (master's or doctoral degrees) and nearly half possessing more than ten years of higher education experience. Most respondents were employed in private universities, followed by public institutions, with smaller proportions from community colleges and vocational schools. Faculty and managerial roles together accounted for the largest share of positions, indicating strong representation from both academic and administrative leadership. Overall, the sample demonstrates a mature, experienced, and well-qualified workforce. In addition, perceived institutional technological readiness was generally moderate to high, highlighting the increasing digital capability and transformation efforts within Jakarta's higher education institutions. Overall, the methodological design ensures rigor, replicability, and empirical robustness in testing the proposed framework linking leadership behavior, organizational virtue, and technological readiness to employee-based brand equity within the Indonesian higher education context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Empirical analyses were performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4.0. Consistent with Hair et al. (2019), the findings are presented in two main phases: measurement model assessment and structural model evaluation.

Measurement Model

The measurement model was examined to ensure the reliability and validity of all constructs prior to hypothesis testing. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR), while convergent validity was evaluated through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As shown in Table 2, all constructs demonstrate strong reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.866 to 0.950 and Composite Reliability values between 0.902 and 0.958, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. These results confirm that the measurement items within each construct exhibit substantial internal consistency. Convergent validity was also established, as all AVEs exceeded the 0.50 benchmark, ranging from 0.649 (EBBE) to 0.743 (OLR). This indicates that the underlying latent variable explains more than 50% of the variance in each construct's indicators. Collectively, these results verify that the reflective measurement model demonstrates adequate reliability and convergent validity, supporting its suitability for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 2: Consistent Reliability & Convergent Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE)	0.866	0.874	0.902	0.649
Online Learning Readiness (OLR)	0.95	0.959	0.958	0.743
Organizational Virtuousness (OV)	0.945	0.948	0.955	0.725
Servant Leadership (SL)	0.868	0.894	0.906	0.662

Discriminant validity was assessed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 3, the square root of each construct's Average Variance Extracted (AVE) exceeded its correlations with other constructs, confirming that each construct shared more variance with its own indicators than with those of other constructs. For example, the square roots of AVE values were 0.806 for EBBE, 0.862 for OLR, 0.851 for OV, and 0.813 for SL, each greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations. Similarly, all HTMT values ranged between 0.593 and 0.801, remaining well below the recommended conservative threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). These results collectively confirm satisfactory discriminant validity and indicate that the latent constructs are empirically distinct.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity Assessment (Fornell–Larcker and HTMT Criteria)

Fornell–Larcker Criterion	EBBE	OLR	OV	SL
Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE)	0.806			
Online Learning Readiness (OLR)	0.662	0.862		
Organizational Virtuousness (OV)	0.656	0.668	0.851	
Servant Leadership (SL)	0.596	0.551	0.741	0.813
HTMT Criterion				

Fornell–Larcker Criterion	EBBE	OLR	OV	SL
	EBBE	OLR	OV	
Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE)	—			
Online Learning Readiness (OLR)	0.714	—		
Organizational Virtuousness (OV)	0.698	0.690	—	
Servant Leadership (SL)	0.644	0.593	0.801	—

The measurement model was assessed to confirm indicator reliability and convergent validity. As shown in Table 4, all items loaded significantly on their respective constructs, with standardized loadings ranging from 0.612 to 0.914, surpassing the minimum threshold of 0.60 (Hair et al., 2019). A few items under Online Learning Readiness (OLR) exhibited outer VIF values slightly above 5.0 (maximum = 6.26), indicating moderate multicollinearity; however, these values remain acceptable as the model is reflective and supported by strong reliability and discriminant validity. Therefore, all indicators were retained due to their theoretical and empirical importance. Overall, the measurement model demonstrates satisfactory indicator reliability and convergent validity across all constructs.

Table 4: Indicator Loadings and Multicollinearity Diagnostics (VIF Values)

Construct	Code	Measurement Item (Translated into English)	Factor Loading	Outer VIF
Servant Leadership (SL)	SL1	My department head listens receptively and openly, without making judgments.	0.612	1.33
	SL2	My department head develops others to become leaders.	0.846	2.354
	SL3	My department head provides encouragement and affirmation.	0.875	2.868
	SL4	My department head expresses an openness to learn from others.	0.885	2.658
	SL5	My department head accepts the uniqueness of individuals?	0.818	2.251
Organizational Virtuousness (OV)	OV1	My institution provides compassionate support to employees who are experiencing difficulties.	0.879	3.812
	OV2	My institution demonstrates and fosters trust and integrity among employees.	0.873	3.918
	OV3	My institution demonstrates and fosters gratitude and appreciation toward employees.	0.887	4.355
	OV4	My institution fosters friendships and sincere caring among its members.	0.863	3.197
	OV5	My institution emphasizes the profound purpose and meaningfulness of our work.	0.869	3.706
	OV6	My institution helps inspire employees.	0.817	2.829
	OV7	My institution demonstrates and fosters forgiveness for mistakes.	0.763	2.175
	OV8	My institution is a virtuous (honest, ethical, upright) place to work—it represents the best of humankind.	0.853	3.371
Online Learning Readiness (OLR)	OLR1	My institution assesses technological readiness, which includes evaluating access to the Internet and the available technological systems for online learning.	0.692	2.418
	OLR2	My institution conducts an economic readiness assessment, which examines the organization's willingness to invest in online learning.	0.834	3.96
	OLR3	My institution has the readiness of the human resources to examine the knowledge and the skills possessed by those involved in online learning.	0.891	4.426
	OLR4	My institution has the readiness of content, which examines the availability of the educational content and its adequacy for	0.904	5.178

Construct	Code	Measurement Item (Translated into English)	Factor Loading	Outer VIF
Learning Readiness (OLR)		online learning.		
	OLR5	My institution has the educational readiness, which examines an organization's ability to design an educational program suitable for employees.	0.914	6.261
	OLR6	My institution has the entrepreneurial readiness, which examines the organization's structure and practices that affect online learning.	0.905	6.052
	OLR7	My institution has a readiness culture that examines the organization's and staff's behaviour and attitudes regarding online learning.	0.842	3.421
	OLR8	My institution's leadership readiness examines the administration's support for online learning.	0.894	4.742
Employee-based Brand Equity (EBBE)	EBBE1	I support consistent behavior aligned with the institution's brand promise where I work.	0.814	2.138
	EBBE2	I consider the influence on my institution's brand before taking any action or communicating.	0.798	2.441
	EBBE3	I recommend my institution to friends and family.	0.812	2.206
	EBBE4	I am eager to learn about the brand of my institution and its significance to me in my role.	0.821	2.636
	EBBE5	I am very satisfied with my job at this institution.	0.783	1.739

In summary, the measurement model demonstrated strong reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity across all constructs, confirming that the indicators appropriately represent their latent variables. Having established the robustness of the measurement model, the next stage involves evaluating the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships among Servant Leadership, Organizational Virtuousness, Online Learning Readiness, and Employee-Based Brand Equity.

Structural Model Assessment

After confirming that the measurement model demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, the next step was to evaluate the structural model to examine the hypothesized causal relationships among the latent constructs. The assessment of the structural model followed the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019, 2022), which recommend testing for potential collinearity issues, estimating the significance and relevance of path coefficients, and examining the model's explanatory and predictive power. Accordingly, the evaluation included the analysis of inner Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values to assess multicollinearity, the coefficient of determination (R^2) to measure explanatory power, the effect size (f^2) to determine each predictor's contribution, and the predictive relevance (Q^2) obtained through the blindfolding procedure. The assessment of collinearity among predictor constructs in Table 5 showed that all VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 2.818, well below the conservative threshold of 5.0 (Hair et al., 2019), indicating no multicollinearity concerns in the model. The coefficient of determination (R^2) values demonstrated that Servant Leadership, Online Learning Readiness, and Organizational Virtuousness collectively explained 53.8% of the variance in Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE), 30.4% in Online Learning Readiness (OLR), and 54.9% in Organizational Virtuousness (OV), reflecting moderate to substantial explanatory power (Cohen, 1988; Hair et al., 2021). The f^2 results further revealed that Servant Leadership had a strong effect

From Leadership to Brand Equity: The Mediating Roles of Virtuousness and Online Learning Readiness in Indonesian Higher Education on Organizational Virtuousness ($f^2 = 1.216$) and a moderate effect on Online Learning Readiness ($f^2 = 0.437$). In contrast, smaller effects were observed for its influence on EBBE ($f^2 = 0.037$) and OLR on EBBE ($f^2 = 0.175$). The predictive relevance (Q^2) values for all endogenous constructs exceeded zero: 0.290 for EBBE, 0.218 for OLR, and 0.387 for OV, confirming the model's satisfactory predictive validity and its capability to predict endogenous construct indicators beyond mere parameter estimation (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 5: Summary of Structural Model Assessment

Endogenous Construct	Predictor(s)	Inner VIF	R ²	R ² Adjusted	f ²	Q ²
EBBE	OLR	1.828	0.538	0.521	0.175	0.290
	OV	2.818			0.049	
	SL	2.245			0.037	
OLR	SL	1.000	0.304	0.296	0.437	0.218
OV	SL	1.000	0.549	0.543	1.216	0.387
SL	—	—	—	—	—	—

As shown in Figure 2, the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM) demonstrates satisfactory explanatory capability. The endogenous constructs exhibit R² values of 0.304 for Online Learning Readiness (OLR), 0.549 for Organizational Virtuousness (OV), and 0.538 for Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE), suggesting that the model accounts for a moderate to substantial proportion of their variance.

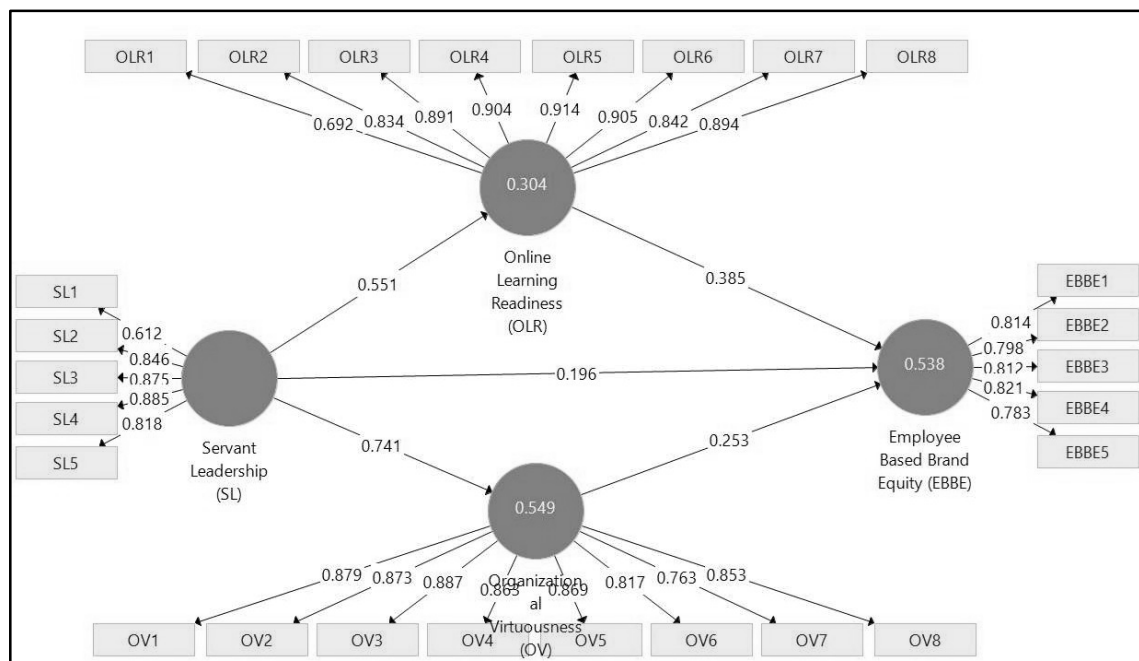


Figure 2: Structural model output (SEM-PLS)

The structural model was assessed through path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values obtained via bootstrapping (5,000 subsamples) in SmartPLS 4.0. As shown in Table 6, Servant Leadership (SL) had a significant positive effect on Online Learning Readiness (OLR) ($\beta = 0.551$, $t = 4.962$, $p < 0.001$) and Organizational Virtuousness (OV) ($\beta = 0.741$, $t = 8.405$, $p < 0.001$). In turn, OLR exerted a significant positive influence on Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) ($\beta = 0.385$, $t = 3.416$, $p < 0.001$). At the same time, the direct path from OV to EBBE was positive but not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.253$, $t = 1.578$, $p = 0.058$). Servant Leadership also directly predicted EBBE ($\beta = 0.596$, $t = 6.532$, $p < 0.001$).

Regarding mediation effects, the total indirect effect of Servant Leadership on EBBE was significant ($\beta = 0.400$, $t = 3.722$, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, OLR significantly mediated the relationship between SL and EBBE ($\beta = 0.212$, $t = 2.488$, $p = 0.007$), whereas the mediating role of OV was not significant ($\beta = 0.188$, $t = 1.573$, $p = 0.058$). These findings indicate that SL enhances EBBE both directly and indirectly, primarily through its positive influence on OLR.

Table 6: Path Coefficients and Mediation Analysis Results

Path	Original Sample (β)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	t-Statistics	p-Values	Result
Direct Effects						
H1: SL to EBBE	0.596	0.600	0.091	6.532	0.000	Supported
H2: OV to EBBE	0.253	0.246	0.161	1.578	0.058	Not Supported
H3: OLR to EBBE	0.385	0.391	0.113	3.416	0.000	Supported
H4: SL to OV	0.741	0.739	0.088	8.405	0.000	Supported
H5: SL to OLR	0.551	0.555	0.111	4.962	0.000	Supported
Indirect Effects						
H6: SL to OLR to EBBE	0.212	0.219	0.085	2.488	0.007	Supported
H7: SL to OV to EBBE	0.188	0.179	0.119	1.573	0.058	Not Supported
Total Mediation Effects						
SL to EBBE (Total)	0.400	0.399	0.107	3.722	0.000	Supported

The mediation analysis results from Table 6 also revealed a complementary partial mediation effect. Servant Leadership (SL) exerted a significant direct influence on Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE), while Online Learning Readiness (OLR) partially mediated this relationship. The indirect pathway through Organizational Virtuousness (OV) was positive but not significant. These findings suggest that servant leaders enhance employees' brand-supportive behaviors both directly and indirectly by strengthening institutional readiness for online learning.

The structural model demonstrates satisfactory explanatory power and predictive relevance. The R^2 values of 0.304 for Online Learning Readiness (OLR), 0.549 for Organizational Virtuousness (OV), and 0.538 for Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) indicate that Servant Leadership (SL) and the mediating constructs jointly explain a substantial portion of variance in these endogenous variables. Effect size (f^2) analysis further reveals that SL exerts a large impact on OV ($f^2 = 1.216$) and OLR ($f^2 = 0.437$). At the same time, OLR ($f^2 = 0.175$) and OV ($f^2 = 0.049$) have small-to-moderate effects on EBBE, suggesting differentiated but meaningful influences. The Q^2 values, all positive (0.218–0.387), confirm that the model possesses predictive relevance for the endogenous constructs. Collectively, these results demonstrate that the proposed model is both theoretically sound and statistically robust, supporting the hypothesized relationships among Servant Leadership, Organizational Virtuousness, Online Learning Readiness, and Employee-Based Brand Equity.

This study examined how Servant Leadership (SL) fosters Organizational Virtuousness (OV) and Online Learning Readiness (OLR) to enhance Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE) within Jakarta's HEIs. Grounded in Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron et al., 2004), Servant Leadership Theory (Greenleaf, 1977), and Internal Branding Theory (King & Grace, 2010), the research aimed to clarify the mechanisms through which ethical and people-centered leadership practices translate into stronger internal brand outcomes in higher education institutions adapting to

digital transformation and foreign competition. Structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) results provided nuanced insights into these relationships, revealing both direct and mediated effects among the constructs. To interpret these findings comprehensively, the discussion is structured around the tested hypotheses, linking current evidence to prior empirical research and theoretical perspectives.

Servant leadership (SL) demonstrated a strong and significant positive effect on employee-based brand equity (EBBE), confirming that people-centered leadership strengthens employees' identification with institutional values and their willingness to act as brand ambassadors. This result aligns with prior evidence from Eva et al. (2019), Hoch et al. (2018), and Roh (2023), who found that servant leaders promote psychological safety, engagement, and learning by emphasizing follower growth, empowerment, and moral integrity. Similarly, He (2022), Yang et al. (2022), and Zhang (2024) reported that when employees perceive their leaders as supportive and value-driven, they reciprocate by engaging in behaviors that reinforce the organizational brand identity. In higher education, servant leaders cultivate autonomy, inclusion, and purpose, which translate into authentic, empathetic, and proactive service behaviors. From an internal branding perspective (King & Grace, 2010), this finding underscores leadership as a critical strategic resource for enhancing internal brand strength and institutional reputation by aligning employee values and conduct with the university's brand promise.

Contrary to expectations, organizational virtuousness (OV) did not exert a significant direct effect on employee-based brand equity (EBBE) once servant leadership (SL) and online learning readiness (OLR) were included in the model. This finding diverges from earlier evidence suggesting that virtuous organizational climates enhance employee commitment, citizenship behavior, and brand identification (Cameron et al., 2011; He, 2022; Ho et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022; Gogia et al., 2024). One plausible explanation lies in capability primacy: in technology-mediated and hybrid educational settings, readiness and digital capability may be more immediate drivers of translating ethical values into consistent service behavior. Another interpretation involves statistical masking, as the strong path from SL to OV may have absorbed OV's unique variance in predicting EBBE. Conceptually, this suggests that virtuousness contributes indirectly; its impact on brand equity may depend on leadership-driven climates and employees' readiness to enact moral values within digital learning environments.

The significant positive relationship between online learning readiness (OLR) and employee-based brand equity (EBBE) highlights the strategic importance of digital competence and pedagogical adaptability in higher education branding. Employees who demonstrate self-directed learning, communication efficacy, and technological confidence are better equipped to deliver consistent service quality and embody institutional values in digital settings. This finding supports prior studies showing that readiness fosters engagement, satisfaction, and performance quality (Reyes-Millán et al., 2023; Duan et al., 2024) and aligns with Indonesian evidence emphasizing that institutional infrastructure and managerial support enhance digital teaching efficacy (Nurhikmah et al., 2024). Conceptually, OLR functions as a bridge between capability and brand representation. When employees are confident and digitally fluent, they not only perform more effectively but also reinforce the university's credibility and brand reliability.

The strong, significant relationship between servant leadership (SL) and organizational virtuousness (OV) reinforces the view that ethical, follower-centered leadership cultivates collective moral excellence. Servant leaders embody humility, compassion, and integrity, behaviors that gradually

diffuse through interpersonal modeling and institutional practices, shaping a virtuous organizational culture. This result is consistent with earlier findings that servant leadership fosters prosocial norms such as trust, forgiveness, and gratitude (Eva et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2023; Roh, 2023). In university settings, leaders who empower staff, acknowledge effort, and encourage collaboration help institutionalize shared respect and moral purpose, hallmarks of virtuous climates that sustain cohesion and ethical commitment across academic and administrative functions.

The positive and significant influence of servant leadership (SL) on online learning readiness (OLR) indicates that supportive, empowerment-oriented leadership enhances employees' digital adaptability and confidence. Servant leaders foster psychological safety, provide learning resources, and encourage experimentation—conditions that stimulate self-directed learning and technology acceptance. This finding is consistent with prior studies emphasizing that servant leadership nurtures a growth-oriented climate conducive to continuous digital upskilling and innovation (Han et al., 2024; Los, 2021; Reyes-Millán et al., 2023). Within universities, such leadership behaviors help staff navigate hybrid and online teaching demands more effectively, strengthening institutional agility and sustaining pedagogical excellence in technology-mediated environments.

The finding of partial mediation in the SL → OLR → EBBE pathway indicates that servant leadership enhances employee-based brand equity not only directly but also indirectly through improved online learning readiness. This result supports the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), suggesting that the positive emotions and psychological safety fostered by servant leaders expand employees' capacity for learning and adaptability. As leaders provide encouragement, resources, and trust, employees develop greater digital competence and confidence, enabling more effective brand-aligned behavior in online teaching and service contexts. This aligns with prior studies showing that readiness serves as a mechanism that translates supportive leadership into sustained engagement and performance (Han et al., 2024; Roh, 2023; Reyes-Millán et al., 2023). Hence, online learning readiness functions as a critical internal capability that amplifies the strategic effect of servant leadership on institutional brand strength.

The non-significant indirect effect of organizational virtuousness (OV) in the relationship between servant leadership (SL) and employee-based brand equity (EBBE) suggests that OV may not function as a direct mediating mechanism in this model. Although prior studies highlight that virtuous climates foster trust, compassion, and moral integrity (Eva et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2023), the present findings indicate that these values may exert their influence more indirectly, by shaping a supportive environment that enables learning readiness and adaptive behavior. In other words, OV might strengthen the contextual foundation upon which readiness develops rather than directly translating into brand-related outcomes. Future research could therefore reexamine OV's role as a moderator or higher-order antecedent of OLR, reflecting how moral and relational climates sustain digital transformation and brand-centered engagement in academic institutions.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study advances leadership and internal-branding scholarship by identifying online learning readiness as a capability-based conduit through which servant leadership strengthens employee-based brand equity. Consistent with H1, servant leadership has a direct positive effect on employee-based brand equity. In line with H6, servant leadership also improves employee-based

brand equity indirectly because it enhances online learning readiness and that capability subsequently supports brand-consistent employee outcomes. This dual pathway integrates broaden-and-build logic with internal branding theory and shows that value-driven leadership is most reliably translated into brand-aligned behavior when deliberate capability building for technology-mediated work is present.

The model extends servant leadership theory by specifying online learning readiness as the mechanism that operationalizes servant behaviors in digital contexts. Rather than merely elevating climate, hallmark practices such as empowerment, humility, and service are converted into teachable, measurable capabilities, platform fluency, digital-pedagogy efficacy, and remote collaboration routines, that, as posited in H3, contribute to stronger employee-based brand equity. The results also indicate that servant leadership cultivates organizational virtuousness (H4) and develops online learning readiness as a functional competence (H5), highlighting complementary climate and capability pathways initiated by leadership.

At the same time, the non-significant direct effect of organizational virtuousness on employee-based brand equity (H2) and the absence of organizational virtuousness as a mediator (H7) qualify the assumption that virtuous climates invariably improve internal brand outcomes. The findings suggest that virtue, when not accompanied by digital capability, is insufficient to produce brand-aligned behavior in online or hybrid delivery. Accordingly, organizational virtuousness functions as a context-enabling condition whose benefits depend on the presence of role-relevant capabilities, here, online learning readiness, yielding a contingent, capability-sensitive account of how leadership affects employee-based brand equity in digital higher education.

In practice, universities can build a durable internal-branding culture grounded in organizational virtuousness and online learning readiness by coupling servant-leadership development with systematic readiness investments. Institutions should embed organizational virtuousness (trust, integrity, compassion) into daily academic service; institutionalize readiness through continuous digital-pedagogy upskilling, peer mentoring, instructional-design clinics, and just-in-time platform support; and align human resources and quality-assurance systems so indicators of virtue and readiness are jointly incorporated into appraisal and promotion. Adequate resourcing, time, tools, and psychological safety ensures that servant behaviors consistently translate into capability growth, thereby strengthening employee-based brand equity as reflected in H1, H3, and H6.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study provides valuable insights into the role of servant leadership in enhancing employee-based brand equity through online learning readiness, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation; future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to observe how leadership-driven readiness evolves and sustains brand equity over time. Second, data were drawn primarily from universities under the LLDIKTI Region III (Jakarta area), which may limit generalizability to other Indonesian regions with different governance structures or digital infrastructures. Expanding the sampling frame to include multiple LLDIKTI regions or public institutions would strengthen external validity.

Additionally, since organizational virtuousness (H2, H7) was not supported as a direct or mediating factor, future studies could re-examine its role under different contexts, such as varying organizational cultures, digital maturity levels, or leadership styles, to identify boundary conditions for its influence. Researchers may also introduce moderating or additional mediating variables, such as psychological empowerment, institutional trust, or innovation climate, to extend the theoretical model. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches could further enrich understanding of how leadership values translate into readiness and brand behavior in digital higher education environments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how servant leadership (SL) fosters employee-based brand equity (EBBE) through organizational virtuousness (OV) and online learning readiness (OLR) within Indonesian HEIs under LLDIKTI Region III. Using PLS-SEM, the findings reveal that SL exerts both direct and indirect positive effects on EBBE, with OLR serving as a significant mediating pathway. While SL also strengthens OV, virtuousness alone does not translate into brand equity once leadership and readiness are taken into account. These results highlight that leadership-driven capability building, rather than values alone, drives brand- consistent employee behavior in higher education contexts. Theoretically, the study integrates servant leadership theory with internal branding and capability-based perspectives, demonstrating how human-centered leadership transforms institutional values into performance readiness and brand equity. Practically, it underscores the importance of cultivating servant leaders who not only inspire but also enable digital readiness through empowerment, training, and psychological safety. In essence, the central message of this article is that servant leadership has its most significant impact when it builds readiness, the bridge between institutional values and brand performance.

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