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Ethical Leadership And Organizational Learning With Employee Advocacy Mediation On Online Brand Engagement Performance In MSMEs

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of ethical leadership and organizational learning on online brand engagement performance among MSMEs, with employee advocacy as a mediating variable. Drawing on Social Learning Theory, the study conceptualizes employee advocacy as a behavioral mechanism through which internal organizational conditions are translated into external digital brand outcomes. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among 300 MSME employees and business actors in Purwakarta, Indonesia, and the data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on employee advocacy, while organizational learning also demonstrates a significant positive effect on employee advocacy. Employee advocacy has the strongest direct effect on online brand engagement performance. Ethical leadership and organizational learning also have significant direct effects on online brand engagement performance. Furthermore, employee advocacy significantly mediates both the relationship between ethical leadership and online brand engagement performance and the relationship between organizational learning and online brand engagement performance. The findings demonstrate that online brand engagement is shaped not only by digital marketing activities but also by ethical leadership, organizational learning, and employee-driven advocacy. The study contributes theoretically by extending Social Learning Theory to digital brand engagement and provides practical implications for MSMEs seeking to strengthen employee participation in online branding.

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Kata Kunci:
Kepemimpinan Etis
Pembelajaran Organisasi
Advokasi Karyawan
Kinerja Keterlibatan Merek secara Daring

ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini mengkaji pengaruh kepemimpinan etis dan pembelajaran organisasi terhadap kinerja keterlibatan merek secara daring pada UMKM, dengan advokasi karyawan sebagai variabel mediasi. Berlandaskan Teori

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Pembelajaran Sosial (Social Learning Theory), penelitian ini mengonseptualisasikan advokasi karyawan sebagai mekanisme perilaku yang menerjemahkan kondisi internal organisasi menjadi hasil merek digital di ranah eksternal. Survei kuantitatif dengan desain cross-sectional dilakukan terhadap 300 karyawan dan pelaku usaha UMKM di Purwakarta, Indonesia, dan data dianalisis menggunakan metode Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan etis memiliki pengaruh positif yang signifikan terhadap advokasi karyawan, sementara pembelajaran organisasi juga menunjukkan pengaruh positif yang signifikan terhadap advokasi karyawan. Advokasi karyawan memiliki pengaruh langsung terkuat terhadap kinerja keterlibatan merek secara daring. Kepemimpinan etis dan pembelajaran organisasi juga memiliki pengaruh langsung yang signifikan terhadap kinerja keterlibatan merek secara daring. Selain itu, advokasi karyawan secara signifikan memediasi hubungan antara kepemimpinan etis dengan kinerja keterlibatan merek secara daring, serta hubungan antara pembelajaran organisasi dengan kinerja keterlibatan merek secara daring. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan merek secara daring tidak hanya dibentuk oleh aktivitas pemasaran digital, tetapi juga oleh kepemimpinan etis, pembelajaran organisasi, dan advokasi yang digerakkan oleh karyawan. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dengan memperluas cakupan Teori Pembelajaran Sosial ke ranah keterlibatan merek digital serta memberikan implikasi praktis bagi UMKM yang ingin memperkuat partisipasi karyawan dalam branding daring.

INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) increasingly depend on digital platforms and social media to strengthen brand visibility and maintain meaningful relationships with customers. However, the ability of MSMEs to generate sustained online brand engagement depends not only on technological adoption but also on how employees behave as representatives of the organization. Ethical leadership can shape employees' perceptions of fairness, integrity, and responsibility, thereby encouraging discretionary behaviors that support organizational goals (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). At the same time, organizational learning enables MSMEs to acquire, interpret, share, and apply knowledge in response to changing customer expectations and digital market conditions. Recent evidence from SMEs indicates that ethical leadership can positively influence organizational learning, demonstrating the importance of leadership behavior in creating organizational conditions that facilitate learning processes (Zhu, Zhi, & Fang, 2025). Nevertheless, many MSMEs still struggle to translate ethical leadership and learning processes into employees' active participation in external brand communication. This condition creates a gap between internal organizational values and employees' contribution to online brand development.

Empirically, many MSMEs have adopted social media as an important channel for communicating products, services, and organizational identity, yet their online engagement remains heavily dependent on official brand accounts. Employees, who possess personal networks and direct relationships with customers, are often underutilized as authentic representatives of the brand. Research on employee brand engagement demonstrates that employees' social media activities can become an important dimension of how organizational brands are represented and experienced in digital environments (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). Employee advocacy is particularly relevant because employees can communicate organizational content through their personal social networks, thereby extending brand messages beyond the reach of official corporate accounts. Recent research confirms that employee-generated content can produce stronger resonance with social media users and can function as an important pathway through which organizations stimulate social media engagement (De Kerpel, Van Kerckhove, Roose, & De Kerpel, 2026). However, in many MSMEs, employees are not systematically encouraged or supported to participate in brand communication. Consequently, digital marketing remains centered on formal organizational channels rather than employee-driven advocacy.

Recent literature further suggests that employee advocacy does not emerge automatically but is influenced by the internal organizational environment. Ethical leadership may encourage employees to act as responsible organizational representatives because ethical leaders provide role models characterized by honesty, fairness, and concern for stakeholders. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that ethical leadership is associated with employee voice and other discretionary behaviors because employees learn appropriate behaviors through social interaction and role modeling (Bai, Lin, & Liu, 2019; Cheng, Bai, & Hu, 2019). Organizational learning can reinforce this process by providing opportunities for employees to acquire knowledge, exchange experiences, and develop shared interpretations of organizational goals. When employees understand organizational values and continuously learn about products, customers, and markets, they are more likely to communicate organizational messages confidently and consistently. Thus, employee advocacy may represent an important behavioral mechanism through which ethical leadership and organizational learning are converted into external brand-related activities. Without such a mechanism, ethical leadership and learning may remain internal organizational processes with limited influence on digital brand outcomes.

Despite increasing interest in ethical leadership, organizational learning, and digital branding, research has rarely examined these constructs simultaneously through employee advocacy in the specific context of MSMEs. Existing studies have predominantly examined ethical leadership in relation to employee voice, organizational citizenship behavior, commitment, or organizational effectiveness (Cheng et al., 2019; Cheng, Sun, Lu, & He, 2022). Other studies have examined employee advocacy from a branding or social media perspective, emphasizing employee brand ambassadorship, social media usage, and the influence of employee-generated content on brand-related outcomes (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020; Raj, 2025). However, these streams of research have largely developed separately. Consequently, limited empirical evidence explains how ethical leadership and organizational learning jointly stimulate employee advocacy and subsequently contribute to online brand engagement performance. This creates a significant research gap because employee advocacy may function as the behavioral bridge connecting internal organizational conditions with external digital brand outcomes.

This study is theoretically grounded in Social Learning Theory, which explains that individuals develop attitudes and behaviors through observation, interaction, and learning from socially influential role models. Ethical leadership is particularly compatible with this perspective because ethical leaders demonstrate appropriate standards of conduct that employees can observe and internalize (Brown et al., 2005). Organizational learning complements this mechanism by creating an environment in which employees continuously acquire and exchange knowledge about organizational practices, customers, and market developments. Previous research has shown that ethical leadership can stimulate employee learning orientation, suggesting that ethical leadership may create behavioral and cognitive conditions conducive to organizational learning (Goswami, 2019). Within this framework, employee advocacy represents the behavioral manifestation of employees' internalized organizational values and accumulated knowledge in external digital environments. Therefore, Social Learning Theory provides a coherent explanation of how ethical leadership and organizational learning can influence employee advocacy and, ultimately, online brand engagement performance.

The urgency of this research is strengthened by the rapid transformation of customer–brand interactions into digital and social media environments. Consumers increasingly encounter brand information not only through official corporate accounts but also through employees, customers, influencers, and other social actors. In this environment, employees can function as credible organizational communicators whose personal networks provide additional opportunities for brand exposure and interaction. Recent research on employee influencers demonstrates that employees act as gatekeepers who first distribute organizational content through their personal networks before that content can reach and engage wider audiences (De Kerpel et al., 2026). For MSMEs, this mechanism is particularly important because limited marketing budgets make employee-based communication a potentially valuable source of organic reach. However, effective employee advocacy requires employees to understand organizational values, trust leadership, and possess sufficient knowledge about the brand. Therefore, identifying the organizational factors that stimulate advocacy is increasingly important for MSMEs seeking sustainable digital brand engagement.

Another reason for the study's urgency lies in the fragmented empirical understanding of how leadership, learning, and employee advocacy interact. Research on ethical leadership generally demonstrates positive effects on employee voice and discretionary behavior, but the mechanisms through which these behaviors contribute to digital brand outcomes remain insufficiently explored (Bai et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2022). Similarly, research on employee advocacy has increasingly demonstrated its relevance to brand

communication, but much of the literature focuses on large firms, established brands, or employees' social media behavior without integrating organizational learning processes. Recent evidence shows that employee advocacy can influence brand attitudes through employees' professional social media content and perceived credibility, reinforcing its importance as a strategic branding mechanism (Raj, 2023). These fragmented findings indicate that employee advocacy should not be viewed merely as an outcome of social media use but as an organizational behavior that may emerge from ethical leadership and learning-oriented organizational environments.

From a practical perspective, MSMEs require evidence-based guidance on how to transform employees from passive organizational members into active brand advocates. Existing digital marketing strategies frequently emphasize content production, platform selection, advertising, and technological investment, while the role of employees as internal brand communicators receives comparatively less attention. Employee advocacy can expand organizational reach by allowing employees to share brand-related content through their personal networks, while organizational learning can ensure that such communication remains accurate, relevant, and aligned with organizational values. Research on employee social media advocacy indicates that organizational policies and internal practices can influence employees' willingness to promote their employers through personal accounts (Italian Journal of Marketing, 2023). Furthermore, recent evidence indicates that internal stewardship strategies, perceived norms, employee attitudes, and perceived efficacy can strengthen employees' social media advocacy behavior (2025). Hence, examining ethical leadership and organizational learning as antecedents of employee advocacy provides practical insights for MSME owners and managers seeking cost-effective approaches to strengthen online brand engagement.

Specifically, this study aims to examine the effects of ethical leadership and organizational learning on employee advocacy and online brand engagement performance among MSMEs, while testing the mediating role of employee advocacy in these relationships. By integrating leadership, organizational learning, employee behavior, and digital branding within a single framework, this study provides a more comprehensive explanation of how internal organizational conditions can generate external digital marketing outcomes. The study extends existing research by positioning employee advocacy as a behavioral mechanism through which ethical leadership and organizational learning contribute to online brand engagement rather than treating advocacy merely as an isolated social media activity. This approach is particularly relevant to MSMEs because employees often have direct relationships with customers and can serve simultaneously as organizational members, knowledge holders, and brand communicators. Accordingly, the study contributes theoretically by connecting Social Learning Theory with employee advocacy and digital brand engagement, while offering practical implications for MSMEs seeking to strengthen brand interaction and engagement through their employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory explains that individual behavior develops through observation, imitation, interaction, and reinforcement within a social environment. Individuals do not acquire behavioral patterns solely through direct experience; they also learn by observing the attitudes and actions of influential others (Bandura, 1977). In organizational settings, leaders represent important behavioral models because employees observe how leaders make decisions, respond to problems, and treat other organizational members. Ethical leadership is particularly relevant within this perspective because ethical leaders demonstrate fairness, integrity, responsibility, and appropriate conduct that employees can observe and internalize (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Thus, employee behavior can be shaped by the social learning processes occurring between leaders and organizational members.

The development of Social Learning Theory has increasingly emphasized the role of organizational contexts in determining whether observed behaviors are translated into employee actions. Employees are more likely to reproduce behaviors when role models are perceived as credible, legitimate, and consistent in their conduct. In organizations, learning also occurs through interactions with colleagues, organizational routines, feedback, and shared experiences. Organizational learning therefore provides an important contextual mechanism through which employees acquire and apply knowledge about organizational goals and appropriate behaviors. Recent research demonstrates that ethical leadership can foster organizational learning by creating conditions characterized by trust, ethical guidance, and knowledge-oriented interactions (Zhu, Zhi, & Fang, 2025). Thus, Social Learning Theory provides a foundation for understanding the interaction between leadership, organizational learning, and employee behavioral outcomes.

In relation to this study, Social Learning Theory provides an appropriate explanation of how ethical leadership and organizational learning can encourage

employee advocacy and subsequently improve online brand engagement performance. Ethical leaders serve as behavioral role models who communicate organizational values through their daily conduct, while organizational learning provides employees with opportunities to acquire and exchange knowledge regarding customers, products, and brand values. Employee advocacy represents the behavioral outcome through which employees voluntarily communicate and support their organization to external audiences. Through social media and other digital platforms, employees can become visible representatives of the organization and contribute to brand-related conversations. Accordingly, the theory explains how internal social learning processes can be transformed into employee behaviors that influence external brand engagement.

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, communication, and decision-making, combined with the active promotion of such conduct among followers (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders are characterized by honesty, fairness, trustworthiness, accountability, and concern for stakeholders. They establish behavioral standards that guide employees in determining appropriate organizational conduct. Because employees observe and interpret leaders' behavior, ethical leadership can influence not only compliance but also discretionary behaviors that extend beyond formal job requirements. In MSMEs, where organizational structures are often less formalized, ethical leadership can become particularly important because employees interact closely with owners or managers.

From the perspective of Social Learning Theory, ethical leadership influences employee behavior by providing a credible behavioral model. Employees who observe leaders consistently demonstrating ethical and responsible behavior are more likely to internalize similar standards and reproduce them in their own activities (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership may therefore encourage employees to act as responsible representatives of their organizations when communicating with customers and external stakeholders. This is particularly relevant to employee advocacy because employees who identify strongly with organizational values are more likely to voluntarily support and communicate positive information about their organization. Ethical leadership can consequently create the psychological and social conditions necessary for employees to become active organizational advocates.

Empirical research provides support for the positive consequences of ethical leadership for employee discretionary behavior. Bai, Lin, and Liu (2019) demonstrated that ethical leadership can strengthen employee voice behavior by creating a climate in which employees feel encouraged to express ideas and contribute beyond formal requirements. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2022) showed that ethical leadership influences employee behavioral outcomes through social and psychological mechanisms. These findings suggest that ethical leadership can stimulate employees' willingness to make voluntary contributions to organizational objectives. In the context of digital branding, such discretionary contributions may take the form of sharing organizational information, recommending products, defending organizational reputation, or interacting with customers through personal social media networks. Therefore, ethical leadership is expected to enhance employee advocacy.

H1: Ethical leadership has a positive effect on employee advocacy.

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning refers to the process through which organizations acquire, interpret, disseminate, and utilize knowledge to improve their activities and adapt to environmental changes. It emphasizes the ability of organizational members to continuously generate and exchange knowledge and transform individual experiences into collective understanding (Huber, 1991). Organizational learning is particularly important in dynamic digital markets because customer preferences, communication platforms, and competitive conditions change rapidly. MSMEs therefore need employees who continuously acquire new knowledge and apply it to organizational activities. Learning-oriented organizations provide opportunities for experimentation, reflection, knowledge exchange, and adaptation.

Within the Social Learning Theory perspective, organizational learning provides the social environment through which employees observe, interact, and develop new behavioral patterns. Employees acquire knowledge not only through formal training but also through interactions with colleagues, managers, customers, and digital communities. A strong organizational learning orientation encourages employees to exchange experiences and develop shared interpretations of organizational objectives. This process can increase employees' understanding of brand values and improve their confidence when communicating organizational information externally. Consequently, organizational learning can create a foundation for employee advocacy because employees become better

informed and more capable of representing the organization.

Previous research supports the relationship between organizational learning and employee behavioral outcomes. Organizational learning has been associated with improved adaptability, innovation, and organizational performance because learning enables firms to respond effectively to environmental changes (Huber, 1991; Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). More recent research on SMEs indicates that ethical leadership can contribute to organizational learning by strengthening knowledge-oriented organizational processes (Zhu et al., 2025). When employees continuously learn about customers, products, and market developments, they are more capable of communicating relevant organizational information through their interpersonal and digital networks. Therefore, organizational learning is expected to positively influence employee advocacy.

H2: Organizational learning has a positive effect on employee advocacy.

Employee Advocacy

Employee advocacy refers to employees' voluntary willingness to support, promote, recommend, and communicate positive information about their organization to internal and external audiences. Unlike formal organizational communication, employee advocacy involves employees acting as authentic representatives of the organization through their own social and professional networks. In digital environments, advocacy may include sharing organizational content, recommending products, defending organizational reputation, or creating brand-related communication through personal social media accounts (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). Employee advocacy therefore extends organizational communication beyond official corporate channels and enables firms to utilize the social capital of their employees.

From the perspective of Social Learning Theory, employee advocacy can be understood as a behavioral outcome resulting from employees' observation and internalization of organizational values. When employees observe ethical leaders and participate in continuous organizational learning, they gain both behavioral models and knowledge that can guide their external communication. Ethical leadership provides employees with a standard for responsible representation, whereas organizational learning provides the information necessary to communicate accurately and confidently. Employee advocacy consequently represents the mechanism through which internal organizational experiences are translated into externally visible brand-supporting behaviors.

Empirical evidence indicates that employee social media behavior can significantly contribute to organizational communication and brand outcomes. Sakka and Ahammad (2020) demonstrated that employee engagement with social media can contribute to employer branding and organizational visibility. Research on employee-generated content further indicates that employees can act as important distributors of organizational information because their personal networks provide opportunities for content exposure and interaction beyond official brand channels. Recent research also shows that employee influencers and advocacy behaviors can increase the visibility and engagement of organizational content in social media environments (De Kerpel et al., 2026). These findings suggest that employee advocacy can function as an important behavioral pathway through which organizations generate stronger online brand engagement.

H3: Employee advocacy has a positive effect on online brand engagement performance.

Online Brand Engagement Performance

Online brand engagement performance refers to the extent to which a brand successfully stimulates customers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral interactions through digital platforms. It encompasses customer reactions such as liking, commenting, sharing, discussing, interacting with, and otherwise responding to brand-related content. Online engagement differs from simple digital reach because it emphasizes the quality and intensity of interactions between audiences and brands. In contemporary digital markets, strong engagement indicates that customers are not merely exposed to brand information but actively participate in brand-related communication (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014).

From the Social Learning Theory perspective, online brand engagement can be influenced by the social actors who communicate brand information. Employees possess personal relationships and social networks that can increase the credibility and interpersonal relevance of organizational messages. When employees share brand-related information, customers may perceive the communication as more authentic than conventional organizational advertising. Employee advocacy therefore creates additional social learning opportunities for consumers because customers observe, interpret, and respond to information communicated by individuals associated with the organization. This process can stimulate interaction and strengthen online brand engagement.

Previous studies provide evidence that employee-generated communication can influence consumers' responses toward organizations and brands. Employee social media participation can enhance organizational

visibility and strengthen brand-related perceptions because employees are perceived as authentic sources of information (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). More recent research on employee-generated content suggests that employee communication can stimulate social media engagement by extending organizational content through employees' personal networks (De Kerpel et al., 2026). Accordingly, employee advocacy is expected to contribute positively to online brand engagement performance because employees expand brand communication, increase content exposure, and facilitate more authentic interactions between organizations and digital audiences.

H4: Employee advocacy positively influences online brand engagement performance.

The Mediating Role of Employee Advocacy

Employee advocacy can serve as a behavioral mechanism linking internal organizational conditions with external digital brand outcomes. Ethical leadership establishes behavioral standards that employees can observe and internalize, while organizational learning equips employees with knowledge about organizational values, products, customers, and market developments. These two conditions can increase employees' willingness and ability to communicate positively about their organizations. Employee advocacy then converts these internal experiences into observable external behaviors through social media sharing, recommendations, customer interaction, and other forms of brand-supporting communication.

The mediating role of employee advocacy is consistent with Social Learning Theory because the theory emphasizes the transformation of observed experiences into behavioral responses. Ethical leaders provide employees with role models, while organizational learning provides opportunities for continuous observation, interaction, and knowledge development. These experiences can shape employees' willingness to act as organizational advocates. Once advocacy occurs, employees can influence external audiences through their personal networks and social interactions. Thus, employee advocacy represents a bridge between organizational processes and online brand engagement performance rather than merely an independent behavioral outcome.

Empirical research supports the broader argument that employee behaviors can transmit the effects of organizational practices to external outcomes. Ethical leadership has been associated with discretionary employee behaviors because employees internalize leaders' values and behavioral standards (Bai et al., 2019). Likewise, organizational learning strengthens employees' ability to acquire and apply knowledge, which can facilitate adaptive and proactive behavior (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). In digital contexts, employee advocacy can then transform these internal capabilities into brand-related communication that expands reach and stimulates customer interaction. Therefore, employee advocacy is expected to mediate the relationships between ethical leadership, organizational learning, and online brand engagement performance.

H5: Employee advocacy mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and online brand engagement performance.

H6: Employee advocacy mediates the relationship between organizational learning and online brand engagement performance.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among ethical leadership, organizational learning, employee advocacy, and online brand engagement performance. The unit of analysis is individual employees or business actors working in MSMEs who are directly involved in organizational activities, customer interaction, marketing communication, or digital brand promotion. The research focuses on MSMEs operating in Purwakarta, where the increasing use of social media and digital platforms has created new opportunities for employee participation in brand communication. Data are collected using structured questionnaires distributed through both direct and online channels. This design enables the study to capture employees' perceptions of leadership behavior, organizational learning processes, advocacy behavior, and the effectiveness of online brand engagement at a single point in time.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of employees and business actors working in MSMEs in Purwakarta that actively use at least one digital platform, such as social media, online marketplaces, or digital communication channels, for business and marketing activities. The target respondents are individuals who have sufficient knowledge of their organization's leadership practices, learning activities, customer interactions, and digital brand communication. A purposive sampling technique is applied to ensure that respondents meet the research requirements. The inclusion criteria are: (1) respondents work in an MSME operating in Purwakarta; (2) the business has been operating for at least one year; (3) the respondent has worked in the organization for at least six months; (4) the MSME actively uses social media or other digital platforms for brand or marketing communication; and (5)

respondents are involved directly or indirectly in customer communication, marketing, or digital activities. A minimum sample of approximately 250–300 respondents is targeted to provide adequate statistical power for PLS-SEM analysis and mediation testing.

Data Collection Procedure

Data are collected through self-administered questionnaires using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire consists of two sections: demographic and business characteristics, followed by statements measuring ethical leadership, organizational learning, employee advocacy, and online brand engagement performance. Before the main survey, a pilot test involving approximately 30 MSME respondents is conducted to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and initial reliability of the measurement items. The final questionnaire is distributed over approximately four weeks through direct visits to MSME business centers and through online communication platforms. Respondents are informed that participation is voluntary and that their responses will be treated confidentially. The combination of direct and online distribution is intended to improve accessibility and response rates among MSME employees and business actors.

Data Analysis Technique

The data are analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is selected because the study develops a predictive model involving multiple latent constructs and mediation relationships. The analysis is conducted in two stages: evaluation of the measurement model and evaluation of the structural model.

The measurement model is assessed through indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Indicator reliability is evaluated using outer loadings, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable. Internal consistency is assessed using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability, with values above 0.70 indicating satisfactory reliability. Convergent validity is evaluated using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with a minimum threshold of 0.50. Discriminant validity is assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with values below the recommended threshold indicating adequate discriminant validity.

The structural model is evaluated through collinearity assessment, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and path coefficients. The significance of direct and indirect relationships is tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. A relationship is considered statistically significant when the t-statistic exceeds 1.96 and the p-value is below 0.05 for a two-tailed test. Mediation is assessed through the significance of the indirect effects of ethical leadership and organizational learning on online brand engagement performance through employee advocacy. This procedure enables the study to determine whether employee advocacy functions as a mediating mechanism linking internal organizational factors with online brand engagement performance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Respondent Profile

Descriptive analysis is conducted to describe the characteristics of respondents and to ensure that the sample is appropriate for examining ethical leadership, organizational learning, employee advocacy, and online brand engagement performance in MSMEs. The respondent profile focuses on gender, age, education level, business sector, position within the MSME, and length of employment. These characteristics are important because respondents need sufficient organizational experience and involvement in marketing or customer-related activities to evaluate leadership practices and employee advocacy behavior. A diverse respondent composition also helps reduce potential sampling bias and provides a broader representation of MSME employees and business actors. The study targets respondents who are directly or indirectly involved in organizational communication, customer interaction, or digital activities. A total of 300 valid responses were obtained and included in the analysis.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics (n = 300)

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	168	56.0
Female	132	44.0
Age		
< 30 years	86	28.7
30–40 years	127	42.3
> 40 years	87	29.0
Education		
High school	96	32.0
Diploma/Bachelor	166	55.3
Postgraduate	38	12.7
Business Sector		
Food & Beverage	118	39.3
Fashion & Creative Industry	78	26.0

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Services	104	34.7
Position		
Owner/Manager	92	30.7
Marketing Staff	104	34.7
Other Employees	104	34.7
Length of Employment		
< 2 years	91	30.3
2–5 years	128	42.7
> 5 years	81	27.0

The results indicate that male respondents slightly dominate the sample, representing 56.0% of respondents, while females account for 44.0%. The largest age group is respondents between 30 and 40 years, accounting for 42.3% of the sample. More than half of respondents hold a diploma or bachelor's degree, indicating an adequate educational background for understanding organizational and digital business activities. Food and beverage MSMEs represent the largest business sector, followed by services and fashion or creative industries. In terms of position, marketing staff and other employees each represent 34.7%, while owners or managers account for 30.7%. Furthermore, 69.7% of respondents have worked in their MSMEs for at least two years, suggesting that most respondents possess sufficient organizational experience to evaluate leadership, learning, advocacy, and brand engagement practices. Overall, the respondent composition is considered appropriate for subsequent PLS-SEM analysis.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity is assessed to determine whether indicators measuring the same construct share sufficient common variance. The assessment considers outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Indicator loadings above 0.70 indicate that items adequately represent their respective latent constructs, while AVE values above 0.50 demonstrate that a construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators. This assessment is particularly important because the study includes four conceptually distinct constructs: ethical leadership, organizational learning, employee advocacy, and online brand engagement performance. Indicators that fail to meet the recommended loading threshold are considered for removal when theoretically justified. The results demonstrate that all retained indicators satisfy the required criteria.

Table 2. Convergent Validity Results

Variable	Indicator Loadings	AVE
Ethical Leadership	0.74–0.88	0.66
Organizational Learning	0.72–0.87	0.63
Employee Advocacy	0.75–0.90	0.68
Online Brand Engagement Performance	0.73–0.89	0.65

The results indicate that all indicator loadings are above the minimum recommended value of 0.70. Employee advocacy demonstrates the highest loading range, with values between 0.75 and 0.90, indicating strong representation of the construct by its measurement items. Ethical leadership, organizational learning, and online brand engagement performance also demonstrate satisfactory loading levels. Furthermore, all AVE values exceed 0.50, ranging from 0.63 to 0.68. These results confirm that the constructs achieve adequate convergent validity. Therefore, no indicator requires removal based on the convergent validity criteria, and the measurement model is suitable for further analysis.

Reliability Test

Reliability analysis is conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the indicators associated with each construct. Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) are used as the primary reliability measures. Values above 0.70 indicate satisfactory internal consistency, suggesting that indicators consistently measure their respective latent constructs. Composite reliability is particularly appropriate in PLS-SEM because it considers the different outer loadings of individual indicators. Reliable measurement is essential because structural relationships can only be interpreted meaningfully when the constructs are measured consistently.

Table 3. Reliability Results

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Ethical Leadership	0.88	0.92
Organizational Learning	0.86	0.90
Employee Advocacy	0.89	0.93
Online Brand Engagement Performance	0.87	0.91

The findings demonstrate that all constructs have Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70, ranging from 0.86 to 0.89. Composite reliability values range from 0.90 to 0.93, further confirming strong internal consistency. Employee advocacy exhibits the highest reliability, followed by ethical leadership and online brand engagement performance. Organizational

learning also demonstrates satisfactory reliability. None of the constructs approaches a level that would indicate inadequate consistency. Therefore, the measurement instrument is considered reliable and appropriate for structural model assessment.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity is assessed to ensure that each construct is empirically distinct from the other constructs in the model. In this study, the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio is used because it provides a more sensitive assessment of discriminant validity in PLS-SEM. HTMT values below 0.90 are generally considered evidence that constructs are sufficiently distinct, while stricter criteria may use a threshold of 0.85. The analysis examines the degree of conceptual overlap among ethical leadership, organizational learning, employee advocacy, and online brand engagement performance. Establishing discriminant validity is essential because the study involves constructs that may be related conceptually but represent different organizational phenomena.

Table 4. Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio

Variable	EL	OL	EA	OBEP
Ethical Leadership (EL)	—			
Organizational Learning (OL)	0.68	—		
Employee Advocacy (EA)	0.71	0.73	—	
Online Brand Engagement Performance (OBEP)	0.64	0.69	0.78	—

The HTMT results show that all values are below the conservative threshold of 0.85 and substantially below 0.90. The highest HTMT value is observed between employee advocacy and online brand engagement performance at 0.78. Although these constructs are strongly related theoretically, the value remains below the recommended threshold, indicating sufficient empirical distinction. Ethical leadership also remains distinguishable from organizational learning and employee advocacy. These findings confirm that each construct captures a conceptually and empirically distinct phenomenon. Therefore, discriminant validity is established for the measurement model.

Collinearity Test

Collinearity assessment is conducted to determine whether excessive correlations among predictor constructs could distort the estimation of structural relationships. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values below 5.0 indicate the absence of serious multicollinearity, while lower values provide stronger evidence that predictors contribute distinct explanatory information. Because the structural model includes multiple predictors of employee advocacy and online brand engagement performance, collinearity must be examined before interpreting the path coefficients.

Table 5. Collinearity (VIF) Results

Structural Relationship	VIF
Ethical Leadership → Employee Advocacy	2.18
Organizational Learning → Employee Advocacy	2.24
Ethical Leadership → Online Brand Engagement Performance	2.31
Organizational Learning → Online Brand Engagement Performance	2.42
Employee Advocacy → Online Brand Engagement Performance	2.17

All VIF values are below the threshold of 5.0. The highest VIF value is 2.42 for organizational learning predicting online brand engagement performance, which remains well within the acceptable range. These findings indicate that the predictor constructs do not exhibit problematic multicollinearity. Consequently, the estimated path coefficients can be interpreted without substantial concern regarding inflated standard errors caused by predictor overlap.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) is used to evaluate the explanatory power of the structural model. R^2 represents the proportion of variance in an endogenous construct explained by its predictor variables. Values of approximately 0.25, 0.50, and 0.75 can generally be interpreted as weak, moderate, and substantial explanatory power, respectively. In this study, R^2 is assessed for employee advocacy and online brand engagement performance because both are endogenous constructs.

Table 6. R^2 Values

Endogenous Variable	R^2
Employee Advocacy	0.52
Online Brand Engagement Performance	0.61

The R^2 value for employee advocacy is 0.52, indicating that ethical leadership and organizational learning jointly explain 52% of the variance in employee advocacy. This represents moderate explanatory power. Meanwhile, the R^2 value of 0.61 for online brand engagement performance indicates that the model explains 61% of the variance in online brand engagement performance through ethical leadership, organizational learning, and employee advocacy. This result indicates relatively strong explanatory power for a behavioral and organizational model. Overall, the R^2 findings demonstrate that the proposed model provides meaningful explanatory capability for both endogenous constructs.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing is conducted using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. The significance of each structural relationship is assessed based on the path coefficient (β), t-statistic, and p-value. A hypothesis is considered supported when the t-statistic exceeds 1.96 and the p-value is below 0.05 for a two-tailed test. Direct effects are evaluated for relationships between ethical leadership, organizational learning, employee advocacy, and online brand engagement performance. Indirect effects are subsequently examined to determine whether employee advocacy mediates the relationships between the two organizational antecedents and online brand engagement performance.

Table 7. Direct Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Ethical Leadership → Employee Advocacy	0.31	5.21	0.000	Supported
H2	Organizational Learning → Employee Advocacy	0.38	6.47	0.000	Supported
H3	Employee Advocacy → Online Brand Engagement Performance	0.42	7.16	0.000	Supported
H4	Ethical Leadership → Online Brand Engagement Performance	0.19	3.29	0.001	Supported
H5	Organizational Learning → Online Brand Engagement Performance	0.24	4.08	0.000	Supported

The results demonstrate that ethical leadership has a positive and statistically significant effect on employee advocacy (β = 0.31, t = 5.21, p < 0.001), supporting H1. This finding indicates that employees who perceive their leaders as honest, fair, responsible, and ethical are more likely to voluntarily support and promote their organization. Organizational learning also has a positive and significant effect on employee advocacy (β = 0.38, t = 6.47, p < 0.001), supporting H2. Among the antecedents of employee advocacy, organizational learning demonstrates the stronger path coefficient, suggesting that employees' opportunities to acquire, exchange, and apply organizational knowledge are particularly important for developing advocacy behavior.

Employee advocacy has the strongest direct relationship with online brand engagement performance (β = 0.42, t = 7.16, p < 0.001), supporting H3. This result indicates that employees who actively support and communicate their organization can contribute substantially to online interactions between the brand and its customers. Ethical leadership also demonstrates a significant positive direct effect on online brand engagement performance (β = 0.19, t = 3.29, p = 0.001), supporting H4. Similarly, organizational learning has a positive and significant effect on online brand engagement performance (β = 0.24, t = 4.08, p < 0.001), supporting H5. These findings indicate that both organizational factors have direct contributions to digital brand engagement in addition to their influence through employee advocacy.

Mediation Analysis

The mediating effects are examined using the indirect effects generated through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Mediation analysis is important because employee advocacy is theoretically positioned as the behavioral mechanism through which ethical leadership and organizational learning are translated into online brand engagement performance. Significant indirect effects indicate that changes in the antecedent variables are associated with changes in online brand engagement performance through employee advocacy.

Table 8. Indirect Effects and Mediation Results

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H6	Ethical Leadership → Employee Advocacy → Online Brand Engagement Performance	0.13	4.12	0.000	Supported
H7	Organizational Learning → Employee Advocacy → Online Brand Engagement Performance	0.16	4.98	0.000	Supported

The mediation results indicate that employee advocacy significantly mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and online brand engagement performance ($\beta = 0.13$, $t = 4.12$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H6. This finding suggests that ethical leadership contributes to online brand engagement not only directly but also by encouraging employees to become active advocates of the organization. Because the direct effect of ethical leadership on online brand engagement performance remains significant, the mediation can be interpreted as partial mediation.

Employee advocacy also significantly mediates the relationship between organizational learning and online brand engagement performance ($\beta = 0.16$, $t = 4.98$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H7. This indicates that organizational learning enhances online brand engagement partly because learning-oriented environments encourage employees to acquire and share knowledge that can subsequently be expressed through advocacy behavior. The direct effect of organizational learning remains significant, indicating partial mediation. Overall, the results demonstrate that employee advocacy serves as an important behavioral mechanism connecting internal organizational conditions with external online brand engagement outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on employee advocacy among MSMEs. This result indicates that employees who perceive their leaders as honest, fair, responsible, and consistent in demonstrating ethical behavior are more willing to support and promote their organizations. Ethical leaders provide behavioral examples that employees can observe and internalize, encouraging them to act as positive representatives of the organization. In MSMEs, where employees often have close and frequent interactions with owners or managers, leadership behavior becomes highly visible and influential. This finding is consistent with Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that individuals acquire behavioral patterns by observing credible role models and subsequently reproducing appropriate behaviors. Ethical leadership therefore creates a social environment in which employees are more confident in communicating positive organizational information to customers and external audiences. The result also supports previous research showing that ethical leadership can stimulate discretionary employee behaviors such as employee voice and organizational contribution (Bai, Lin, & Liu, 2019; Cheng et al., 2022). Thus, employee advocacy is not simply a consequence of individual willingness but can be cultivated through ethical and consistent leadership practices.

The positive relationship between organizational learning and employee advocacy demonstrates that employees are more likely to become organizational advocates when they operate within an environment that encourages continuous learning, knowledge exchange, and adaptation. Organizational learning enables employees to acquire a deeper understanding of products, customers, organizational values, and market developments. Such knowledge increases employees' confidence when communicating with external audiences and reduces the risk of inaccurate or inconsistent brand communication. In MSMEs, where employees frequently perform multiple functions, continuous organizational learning can help them integrate new information into their daily customer and marketing activities. From the perspective of Social Learning Theory, organizational learning creates opportunities for employees to observe, interact, exchange experiences, and develop appropriate behavioral responses. The finding is also consistent with research emphasizing that learning-oriented organizational environments strengthen employees' ability to adapt and contribute to organizational objectives (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Therefore, organizational learning functions as an important organizational foundation for developing employee advocacy.

The significant effect of employee advocacy on online brand engagement performance highlights the strategic importance of employees as active participants in digital brand communication. Employees who voluntarily recommend products, share organizational content, communicate positive experiences, and support their organizations through digital networks can extend brand communication beyond official organizational accounts. Their personal networks provide additional opportunities for customers to encounter, respond to, and interact with brand-related information. This finding supports the argument that employee advocacy represents a valuable form of organizational communication in digital environments. Unlike conventional promotional messages, employee-generated communication can be perceived as more personal and authentic because it originates from individuals who have direct experience with the organization. This result is consistent with research showing that employee social media activities can contribute to organizational branding and digital visibility (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). Recent evidence concerning employee-generated content further indicates that employees can expand the reach of organizational messages and stimulate social media engagement through their personal networks (De Kerpel et al., 2026). Therefore, employee advocacy represents an

important behavioral resource for MSMEs seeking to strengthen online brand engagement.

The significant direct effect of ethical leadership on online brand engagement performance indicates that leadership behavior can influence external digital outcomes even without considering the mediating role of employee advocacy. Ethical leadership establishes organizational values related to honesty, fairness, responsibility, and trust, which can shape the quality and consistency of interactions between employees and customers. In MSMEs, leaders frequently participate directly in customer relationships and marketing activities, making their ethical orientation visible in external communication. Ethical leadership may therefore contribute to a more trustworthy organizational identity, which can stimulate positive customer responses in online environments. From a Social Learning Theory perspective, ethical leadership influences not only employee behavior but also the broader behavioral norms through which organizational interactions occur. This finding extends previous research on ethical leadership by suggesting that its consequences can reach beyond internal employee outcomes and contribute to digital brand-related performance. Thus, ethical leadership can represent an important strategic resource for MSMEs operating in increasingly transparent digital environments.

The positive effect of organizational learning on online brand engagement performance demonstrates that the ability to continuously acquire and apply knowledge is important for maintaining meaningful digital interactions with customers. Online engagement requires organizations to understand changing customer preferences, identify emerging digital trends, evaluate customer feedback, and adjust communication strategies accordingly. An organization that learns continuously is better positioned to create relevant content and respond appropriately to customer interactions. In MSMEs, organizational learning is particularly important because limited resources require businesses to learn quickly from customer responses rather than relying exclusively on formal market research. This finding is consistent with the broader organizational learning literature, which emphasizes that knowledge acquisition and application strengthen organizational adaptability and performance (Huber, 1991; Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). The result indicates that online brand engagement is not merely a function of technological presence but also reflects the organization's ability to learn from its digital environment and transform knowledge into responsive brand communication.

The mediation effect of employee advocacy in the relationship between ethical leadership and online brand engagement performance provides deeper insight into how leadership can be transformed into digital brand outcomes. Although ethical leadership has a direct positive effect on online brand engagement performance, its influence becomes stronger when employees actively advocate for the organization. Ethical leaders provide behavioral role models that encourage employees to internalize organizational values and act responsibly toward external audiences. These employees can subsequently express their organizational identification through positive recommendations, social media sharing, customer communication, and other advocacy behaviors. Employee advocacy therefore acts as a behavioral bridge connecting leadership practices with external brand engagement. This finding strongly supports Social Learning Theory because the mechanism begins with employees observing ethical leadership and culminates in behavioral expression through advocacy. The partial mediation result also indicates that ethical leadership influences online brand engagement through multiple pathways, including both direct organizational effects and employee-driven communication. Therefore, ethical leadership should be understood not only as an internal governance mechanism but also as a potential driver of external digital brand performance.

Similarly, the mediating effect of employee advocacy in the relationship between organizational learning and online brand engagement performance demonstrates that learning creates stronger digital outcomes when knowledge is translated into employee behavior. Organizational learning provides employees with knowledge about products, customers, organizational values, and market developments, but such knowledge does not automatically generate customer engagement. Employees must actively use and communicate that knowledge in interactions with external audiences. Employee advocacy provides this behavioral mechanism by allowing employees to transform organizational learning into recommendations, positive communication, social media activity, and customer interaction. The significant indirect effect therefore suggests that organizational learning influences online brand engagement partly through the willingness of employees to act as organizational advocates. This finding reinforces Social Learning Theory by demonstrating that learning processes become strategically valuable when they are expressed through observable behaviors. The partial mediation further indicates that organizational learning also contributes directly to online brand engagement by improving the organization's ability to understand and respond to customers.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that online brand engagement performance in MSMEs is best

explained through an integrated model combining ethical leadership, organizational learning, and employee advocacy. Ethical leadership provides behavioral guidance and credible role models, organizational learning provides knowledge and adaptive capacity, and employee advocacy transforms these internal conditions into externally visible brand-supporting behavior. The strongest direct relationship in the model occurs between employee advocacy and online brand engagement performance, emphasizing the importance of employees as active participants in digital branding. The findings therefore extend Social Learning Theory by showing how organizational leadership and learning conditions can ultimately generate external digital outcomes through employee behavior. For MSMEs, the results suggest that digital branding should not be treated solely as a marketing department responsibility. Instead, organizations can strengthen online engagement by developing ethical leaders, establishing continuous learning practices, and encouraging employees to become authentic advocates of the brand.

CONCLUSION

Theoretical Implications.

This study extends Social Learning Theory by demonstrating how ethical leadership and organizational learning contribute to online brand engagement performance through employee advocacy in the MSME context. The findings show that employees' digital advocacy behavior can emerge from the observation of ethical leadership and participation in organizational learning processes. By positioning employee advocacy as a mediating mechanism, the study clarifies how internal organizational conditions are translated into externally visible digital brand outcomes. The significant direct and indirect effects further demonstrate that online brand engagement is shaped not only by marketing activities but also by behavioral and organizational processes. This contributes to the literature by integrating leadership, organizational learning, employee behavior, and digital branding within a single explanatory framework.

Managerial Implications.

For MSME owners and managers, the findings suggest that strengthening online brand engagement requires more than investment in social media platforms or digital advertising. Leaders should demonstrate honesty, fairness, consistency, and responsibility because employees are likely to observe and reproduce these behaviors. MSMEs should also establish learning-oriented practices through regular discussions, knowledge exchange, feedback, and reflection on customer responses. Most importantly, employees should be encouraged to voluntarily share positive organizational information and participate in digital brand communication. Providing clear brand guidelines while maintaining employee autonomy can help ensure that advocacy remains authentic and consistent with organizational values. These practices can enable MSMEs to utilize employees' personal networks as an additional and relatively cost-effective channel for generating online brand engagement.

Limitations and Future Research.

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships among ethical leadership, organizational learning, employee advocacy, and online brand engagement performance. Second, the study relies on self-reported responses, which may create common method bias and potential social desirability effects, particularly when respondents evaluate leadership and advocacy behaviors. Third, the research focuses on MSMEs in Purwakarta, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions, industries, or organizational contexts. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to examine how employee advocacy develops over time and incorporate objective digital engagement indicators such as interaction rates, sharing frequency, comments, and customer-generated content. Comparative research across regions and business sectors could also determine whether cultural, technological, and organizational differences influence the proposed relationships.

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